

U.S. Intelligence and the Origins of the Vietnam War, 1962 - 1965

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Abstract

Analysing documents produced by the CIA, the State Department and the Pentagon, the thesis examines the role of intelligence assessment in U.S. Vietnam policy during the period between December 1961 and February 1965. It investigates intelligence on the counterinsurgency in South Vietnam, on the intentions and capabilities of North Vietnam, and on the probable consequences of policy options.

The first half of the thesis examines the Vietnam intelligence during the Kennedy administration, following the rise of optimism in 1962 and the intelligence dispute in 1963. The second half of the study explores intelligence developments from the fall of the Diem regime in November 1963 to President Johnson's decision to take military action against North Vietnam in February 1965.

The study suggests that intelligence deficiencies played a significant role in both the failure of counterinsurgency in the first half of the 1960s and in the decision for direct military intervention in 1965. The thesis also demonstrates that, rather than simply being a result of technical weaknesses, the lack of robust intelligence reflected wider problems of Vietnam policy, including political pressures, ideological contexts and the absence of strategic consensus.

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Abbreviations

AID	Agency for International Development
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
BNE	Bureau of National Estimates
CAS	Covert Action Staff
CF	Country File (the John F. Kennedy Library)
CFV	Country File, Vietnam (the Lyndon B. Johnson Library)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CREST	CIA Records Search Tool
DCI	Director of Central Intelligence
DDI	Deputy Director for Intelligence
DDP	Deputy Director for Plans
DI	Directorate of Intelligence
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency
DP	Directorate of Plans
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam (the official name of North Vietnam)
FBIS	Foreign Broadcast Information Service
FRUS	Foreign Relations of the United States
GVN	Government of [South] Vietnam
INR	Bureau of Intelligence and Research
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
JKFL	John F. Kennedy Library
LBJL	Lyndon B. Johnson Library
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
NA	National Archives
NIE	National Intelligence Estimate
NLF	National Liberation Front
NSC	National Security Council
NSF	National Security File
OCI	Office of Current Intelligence
ONE	Office of National Estimates
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam
PPC	Policy Planning Council
PRC	People's Republic of China
RVN	Republic of Vietnam (the official name of South Vietnam)
SNIE	Special National Intelligence Estimate
USIA	United States Information Agency
USOM	United States Operations Mission
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VC	Viet Cong

Chapter 1

Introduction

In his oft-quoted essay on Leo Tolstoy (“The Hedgehog and the Fox”), philosopher Isaiah Berlin uses a line by the Greek poet Archilochus – “the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing” – to illustrate what he sees as “one of the deepest differences which divides writers and thinkers, and it may be, human beings in general.” On the one side of this “great chasm,” according to Berlin, are those “who relate everything to a single central vision, one system less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel – a single universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance.” The intellectual lives of those on the other side, in contrast, are “centrifugal rather than centripetal.” Their minds are “scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, without, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all embracing, sometimes self-contradictory and incomplete, at times fanatical, unitary inner vision.”¹

In studies of international politics, the aversion to a “fanatical, unitary inner vision” figures prominently in the writings of Classical Realists, who dominated the discipline in the mid-twentieth century. One of the defining features of political realism, according to William Wohlforth, is the primacy of the “dispassionate analysis” of the security situation based on a “deep familiarity with specific players involved in each situation, their history, culture, and collective mindsets.”² Political realism, in this interpretation, is first and foremost against dogma, prejudice, wishful thinking and other forms of cognitive psychological hazards that can obstruct one’s ability to see the world as it is and in all its complexity.³

It is on this basis that Hans Morgenthau – one of the most influential Classical Realists of the twentieth century – opposed the Vietnam War. In April 1965, he criticised the U.S. government for using the simple juxtaposition of “Communism” and “free world” as the guiding framework of its Vietnam policy, when the growing division within the Communist bloc (symbolized by Tito’s

¹ Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (London: Penguin, 1957), p. 22.

² William Wohlforth, “Realism and Foreign Policy,” in Steven Smith, Amelia Hadfield, and Time Dunne eds., *Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008), p. 40.

³ For various traditions and interpretations of realism, see for example: Duncan Bell, “Introduction” in Duncan Bell ed., *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Benjamin Frankel ed., *Roots of Realism* (London: Frank Cass, 1996); Jonathan Haslam, *No Virtue Like Necessity: Realist Thought in International Relations since Machiavelli* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

Yugoslavia and the Sino-Soviet split) and the rise of neutralism in Asia and Africa had diminished the validity of such dualism. He argued that, by sticking to that binary framework, Washington had manoeuvred itself into a “position which is anti-revolutionary per se and which requires military opposition to revolution wherever it is found in Asia, regardless of how it affects the interests – and how susceptible it is to the power – of the United States.” He stressed that “For better or for worse, we live again in an age of revolution. It is the task of statesmanship not to oppose what cannot be opposed without a chance of success, but to bend it to one’s own interests.” Politics, Morgenthau added a month later, is “the art of the possible. There are certain things that you would like to do but you can’t do because you haven’t got the means to do them.”⁴

In *Vietnam: the Logic of Withdrawal* (1967), historian Howard Zinn also criticises the way of thinking and general assumptions underlying the Vietnam policy. At the beginning of the book, he emphasises:

What we bring to the common body of evidence in Vietnam – the perspective we have – is critical. It determines what we choose to see or not to see. It determines how we relate the things we see. This perspective varies from one person to another. I think we get closer to wisdom, and also to democracy, when we add the perspectives of other people to our own.

In the rest of the book, Zinn clarifies factors that in his view had been obscured or distorted in the government’s justification for its Vietnam policy. He argues, for instance, that, rather than standing up to “communist aggression from the North,” the U.S. government was fighting insurgents who were estimated to be more than 80 percent South Vietnamese. Like Morgenthau, Zinn also questions the domino theory, arguing that the United States had to “get accustomed to the idea that there will be more Communist countries in the world and that this is not necessarily bad.” This is because “Communist nations in their international affairs behave very much like other nations,” and they were “as prone to the emotion of nationalism as other nations: they crave independence and resist domination by any other nation, whether capitalist or Communist.” Paranoia, he points out, “starts from a base of facts, but then leaps wildly to a conclusion.”⁵

⁴ Morgenthau quoted in William Wohlforth, “Realism and Foreign Policy,” in Steven Smith, Amelia Hadfield, and Time Dunne eds., *Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008), pp. 40-41. For Morgenthau’s view on Vietnam policy, see also: Hans Morgenthau, *Vietnam and the United States* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1965); Hans Morgenthau, *Truth and Power: Essays of a Decade 1960–70* (London: Paul Mall, 1970), pp. 398–425.

⁵ Howard Zinn, *Vietnam: the Logic of Withdrawal* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1967), pp. 1, 3-4, 90, 101-102.

In the article “The End of Either/Or” published in the same year (1967), McGeorge Bundy levels a similar stricture not against the Johnson administration (for which he served as the national security advisor until 1966) but against “debaters” of the Vietnam policy outside the U.S. government. Insisting that nothing about Vietnam was simple, Bundy argues:

[W]hat has made debate so easy, and action so hard, in Viet Nam is that the debater can defend the propositions he likes from a great pile of evidence in which there is plenty to support every view. In our actions, however, we have to live with the whole.

He acknowledges that the Vietnam conflict involved both aggression from the North and civil conflict within the South, both corruption and self-sacrifice in the US-backed regime in Saigon, and both anti-communist feeling and a lack of affection towards the central government on the part of the South Vietnamese people. “The internal complexities are matched internationally.” While Vietnam was a test case of communist revolutionary doctrine, a victory for Ho Chi Minh would not mean automatic communisation of all Asia, because “The lines of influence and concern stretch out in all direction, but almost never in simple and straightforward terms.” For the Vietnam policy, Bundy concludes, “the only general proposition that seems valid is that sweeping and simple views are useful only for those who do not have responsibility.”⁶

How, then, did decision makers responsible for the Vietnam policy actually understand the complexity of the Vietnam conflict and its international context? How and to what extent did their successes and failures in “dispassionate analysis” and the “art of the possible” influence the country’s growing involvement in the Vietnam conflict?

This study addresses these questions through the examination of intelligence assessment, which, in the U.S. system, is expected to be one of the primary sources of objective, fact-based analysis of foreign affairs. It starts with President Kennedy’s decision to increase the U.S. support for the South Vietnamese government (GVN) in December 1961 and ends with President Johnson’s authorisation of air strikes against North Vietnam in February 1965. It analyses intelligence products on the counterinsurgency in South Vietnam, on the intentions and capabilities of North Vietnam and on the probable consequences of policy options (such as the regime change in 1963 and the military action against North Vietnam in 1965).

⁶ McGeorge Bundy, “The End of Either/Or,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 45, no. 2 (Jan 1967), pp. 191, 194-195.

The thesis demonstrates that, although assessments were not entirely unsuccessful, intelligence-related weaknesses did play an important role in the failure of counterinsurgency during the first half of the 1960s and in the decision for direct military intervention in 1965. It also shows that, rather than merely a cause of policy failures, the lack of robust intelligence was in part a result of broader problems of Vietnam policy, which include the absence of strategic consensus, the political pressure to reject criticism, and the ideological context of U.S. foreign policy in the 1960s.

Through the analysis of diverse challenges in the realms of intelligence and intelligence-policy relations, the study also suggests that, in the face of a complex, unpredictable policy issue like Vietnam, the realist ideal of adept statesmanship based on shrewd, objective assessment can be far more difficult for policymakers to achieve than some advocates of political realism seem to assume.

1. Intelligence assessment and the origins of the Vietnam War

Intelligence assessment in the historiography of the Vietnam War

The literature on the origins of the Vietnam War has extended its scope steadily during the last five decades. The subjects that have already been examined extensively include, for example, the advisory mechanism in the U.S. government, the domestic political considerations of President Johnson, and the decisions made on the “other side,” which included the National Liberation Front (NLF), North Vietnam, China and the USSR.⁷ Despite this expansion in the scope of research, however, the misperceptions and miscalculations on the part of the U.S. government remain a central issue of the Vietnam historiography.

In the view of many historians and commentators who support the “orthodox” interpretation of the Vietnam War, a series of flawed perceptions was a major cause of what they regard as a policy blunder in 1965. They argue that the strategic significance of Vietnam was exaggerated in the framework of the domino theory, which predicted that a U.S. defeat in South Vietnam would be followed by the spread of communist influence in Southeast Asia and/or other parts of the

⁷ For the debates over the origins of the Vietnam War, see for example: Jeffrey Kimball, ed., *To Reason Why: The Debate about the Causes of U.S. Involvement in the Vietnam War* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990); Mark Gilbert ed., *Why the North Won the Vietnam War* (New York: Palgrave, 2002) “Introduction”; Larry Berman and Stephen Routh, “Why the United States Fought in Vietnam,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 6 (2003); Kevin Ruane, “Putting America in its Place? Recent Writing on the Vietnam Wars,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 37, no. 1 (2002); Garry Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America’s Lost War* (Malden: Blackwell, 2009).

developing world.⁸ Similarly, the Cold War rhetoric of dividing the world between communist enemies and non-communist friends is often cited as a reason why policymakers in Washington could not fully appreciate the nationalist drive behind the NLF. The lack of basic knowledge has also been seen as a major source of misjudgements. “First,” Gen. Maxwell Taylor (Ambassador to South Vietnam 1964–1965) later admitted in an interview, “we didn’t know ourselves. We thought we were going into another Korean War, but this was a different country. Secondly, we didn’t know our South Vietnamese allies. We never understood them...and we knew even less about North Vietnam...So, until we know the enemy and know our allies and know ourselves, we’d better keep out of this dirty kind of business.”⁹

In contrast, the revisionists, who regard the war as a necessary, winnable and generally honourable effort by the United States, appear to reject (except for some isolated misjudgements related to military strategy and tactics) that there were fundamental flaws and weaknesses in the government’s perceptions.¹⁰ They argue that the possible domino effect after the fall of South Vietnam was a real threat to U.S. national security, rather than an illusion created by an erroneous application of the domino theory. Michael Lind, for example, maintains that a communist victory in South Vietnam in the mid-1960s was likely to be “followed by a minor regional domino effect and a major global revolutionary wave effect...Once the Vietnam War is viewed in the context of the Cold War, it looks less like a tragic error than like a battle that could have hardly be avoided.”¹¹ The revisionists’ central assertion that the war was clearly winnable also implies that the U.S. government had at least a basic knowledge and cognitive capacity robust enough to carry out counterinsurgency and nation building effectively.

In recent decades, some historians who share the orthodox, negative view of the Vietnam War have also questioned the importance of the domino theory and cognitive problems. In *The Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* (1995), Gareth Porter suggests that the central thread in

⁸ For the debate over the soundness of the Domino Theory see: Garry Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America’s Lost War* (Malden: Blackwell, 2009), Chapter 2 “A Necessary War or a Mistaken War?”

⁹ As quoted in David Elliott, “Official History, Revisionist History, and Wild History,” in Mark Bradley and Marilyn Young eds., *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 281.

¹⁰ For revisionist works, see: David Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: U.S.-Vietnam in Perspective* (San Rafael: Presidio Press, 1978); Bruce Palmer, *The 25-Year War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984); Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnam* (London: White Allen, 1986); Phillip Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History, 1946-75* (London: Sidgwick 1988); Harry Summers, *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* (Navato: Presidio Press, 1982); Michael Lind, *Vietnam: the Necessary War* (New York: Free Press, 1999); Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹¹ Michael Lind, *Vietnam: the Necessary War*, pp. 38, 256.

Washington's geopolitical calculations was the relative weaknesses of China and the USSR (that is, a perceived "imbalance of power" in America's favour) rather than the vulnerability of the U.S. position in Southeast Asia (the fear of a domino effect).¹² Frederic Logevall goes further and dismisses the significance of misperception itself. In his highly acclaimed book *Choosing War: the Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (1999) and in his more recent essays (2004, 2008), Logevall criticises what he regards as the "if only we had known" excuse of the earlier literature. "Policy makers in Washington," he insists, "generally had a sound grasp of the situation on the ground in South Vietnam, and the thinking in Hanoi...the widely repeated assertion – by former officials and many scholars – that American decision makers did not know what they were getting into in Vietnam, cannot withstand close scrutiny. They had a sound grasp of what they were up against."¹³

In the light of all these arguments, it is remarkable that intelligence assessment – a central element of the government's perceptions and calculations – remains almost entirely absent from the mainstream debates on the origins of the Vietnam War. With some exceptions (notably the alleged manipulation of intelligence during the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964¹⁴) the quality and role of intelligence rarely receive more than a passing reference in the general studies of the war's origins. The question of how intelligence materials (that is, the thousands of reports and analyses produced each year to assist Vietnam policy) influenced policymakers' understanding of the conflict during the year leading to the military escalation in 1965 largely remains a missing dimension in the general debates on the Vietnam War.

This omission can partly be explained by the fragmentary and conflicting accounts emerging from the existing literature on Vietnam intelligence. In fact, the

¹² Gareth Porter, *The Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California, 2005).

¹³ Fredrik Logevall, "Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 34 (2004), pp. 105-106. See also: Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: the Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Fredrik Logevall, *The Origins of the Vietnam War* (New York: Longman, 2001); Fredrik Logevall, "'There Ain't No Daylight': Lyndon Johnson and the Politics of Escalation," in Mark Bradley and Marilyn Young eds., *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 91-108.

¹⁴ For the alleged distortion of intelligence on the Gulf of Tonkin incidents, see for example: John Prados, "The Gulf of Tonkin Incident, 40 Years Later: Flawed Intelligence and the Decision for War in Vietnam," *The National Security Archive* <www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB132/index.htm> accessed 3 Feb 2009; Robert Hanyok, "Shunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds and the Flying Fish: the Gulf of Tonkin Mystery 2-4 August 1964," *Cryptologic Quarterly* (2001); Robert Hanyok, *Spartans in Darkness: American SIGINT and the Indochina War, 1945-1975* (Center for Cryptologic History, National Security Agency, 2002).

possibility of study in this area has improved during the last three decades, thanks to declassified internal studies,¹⁵ memoirs of former intelligence officers¹⁶ and research by historians.¹⁷ Almost all of those publications, however, concentrate on a limited numbers of individuals, organizations, events, subjects or documents. From those analyses and narratives, two contrasting images have emerged regarding the role of intelligence in Vietnam policy.

On the one hand, several studies by former officers of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) gave the impression that those organisations' assessments were generally accurate but had no decisive impact on decision-making, because policymakers and the Pentagon did not accept their analysis. *CIA and Vietnam Policymakers* by Harold Ford (a former senior analyst at the CIA's Office of National Estimates), in particular, focuses on three episodes in which the Agency's relatively sound analysis was ignored by policymakers including John McCone (the head of the CIA, 1961–1965).¹⁸ McCone himself, who supported military action against North Vietnam,¹⁹ maintained in an interview (1987/1988) that “had the people responsible for the operation in Vietnam listened to the intelligence

¹⁵ The works by former CIA officers include: Harold Ford, “Thoughts Engendered by Robert McNamara's ‘In Retrospect,’” *Studies in Intelligence*, vol. 39, no. 5 (1996), pp. 95-109; Harold Ford, “Why CIA Analysis Were So Doubtful About Vietnam,” *Studies in Intelligence* (1997), pp. 85-95; Harold Ford, *CIA and Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes, 1962-1968* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998); Willard Matthias, “How Three Estimates went Wrong,” *Studies in Intelligence* (Winter 1968); Anthony Lewis, “Re-Examining our Perceptions on Vietnam,” *Studies in Intelligence* (Winter 1973); Ellsworth Bunker, “Vietnam in Retrospect,” *Studies in Intelligence* (Spring 1974). For the INR's study declassified in 2004 and the responses by former head of the INR Thomas Hughes and historian John Prados, see: W. Dean Howells, Dorothy Avery, and Fred Green, *Vietnam 1961-1968 as Interpreted in INR's Production* (U.S. Department of State, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, 1969); Thomas Hughes, “INR's Vietnam Study in Context: A Retrospective Preface Thirty-Five Years Later,” *The National Security Archive*; John Prados, “The Mouse That Roared: State Department Intelligence in the Vietnam War,” *The National Security Archive*. All three documents are available at: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB121/index.htm> accessed 3 April 2010.

¹⁶ George W. Allen, *None So Blind: A Personal Account of the Intelligence Failure in Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001); William Colby, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989); Sam Adams, *War of Numbers: An Intelligence Memoir* (South Royalton: Steerforth Press, 1994); Peer De Silva, *Sub Rosa: The CIA and the Uses of Intelligence* (New York: Times Books, 1978).

¹⁷ John Prados, “Impatience, Illusion, and Asymmetry: Intelligence in Vietnam,” in Marc Gilbert ed., *Why the North Won the Vietnam War* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 137-152; Mark Moyar, “Hanoi's Strategic Surprise,” *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 18, no. 1 (Spring 2003), pp. 155-170.

¹⁸ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*.

¹⁹ Memo, “Summary Record of the Meeting on Southeast Asia on 24 May 1964, 11:00 AM,” LBJL, NSF, NSC History, Box 38, Folder 1, #10; Ford, *CIA and Vietnam Policymakers*, pp. 58-61, 76-78.

analysts, they'd have avoided a great many mistakes.”²⁰ His Deputy Director Ray Cline, another supporter of air strikes,²¹ also argues:

[The] CIA's estimates and other analytical papers in the entire Kennedy-Johnson era were soberer and less optimistic than those of the Defense Department...Desmond Fitzgerald and I both tried to warn that an Asian guerrilla war was not to be easily won by conventional military forces and weapons, but the message did not get across very well...The intelligence was sound, but the policy was not firmly based on the evidence. The result was a tragedy for the United States and the peoples of Southeast Asia.²²

On the other hand, some of the former senior policymakers have suggested that they did not receive proper analytical support from the intelligence community including the CIA and the INR. General Taylor's comment quoted earlier implies that the government did not have solid intelligence on friends, enemies and the conflict itself. Likewise, Robert McNamara (the Secretary of Defense, 1961–1968) argues in his book *In Retrospect* (1995) that the CIA's memo of June 1964 on the possibility of a domino effect (titled “Would the Loss of South Vietnam and Laos Precipitate a ‘Domino Effect’ in the Far East?”) appeared to “confirm my and others’ fear – misplaced in retrospect, but no less real at the time – that the West’s containment policy lay at serious risk in Vietnam. And thus we continued our slide down the slippery slope.”²³ Some studies also suggest that Vietnam intelligence had weaknesses serious enough to undermine the quality of Vietnam policy. Referring to the optimistic assessments of the counterinsurgency in late 1962, the editors of the *Pentagon Papers* judge that reports and intelligence during that period were “not only wrong, but more importantly, they were influential.”²⁴ In his essay “Impatience, Illusion and Asymmetry: Intelligence in Vietnam” (2002), historian John Prados provides an overview of intelligence-related problems before and during the Vietnam War. While acknowledging that “[U.S.] intelligence in Vietnam ultimately functioned with considerable effectiveness,” Prados concludes that “American and South Vietnamese problems in terms of intelligence were

²⁰ John McCone, interviewed by Harry Kreisler, “Reflection on a Life in Government Service: Conversation with John A. McCone” (Autumn 1987 and Spring 1988), <<http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/conversations/McCone/mccone-con0.html>> accessed 19 June 2007.

²¹ Memo, Cline to M. Bundy (n.d.), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 10, Folder 5, #93; Memo, Cline to McCone “Vietnam” (27 Nov 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 10, Folder 5, #93a.

²² Ray Cline, *Secrets, Spies and Scholars: Blueprint of the Essential CIA* (Washington, DC: Acropolis, 1976), p. 199.

²³ Robert McNamara with Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 125.

²⁴ Mike Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of the United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, 5 vols. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), Book 3, IV-3-4, “Phased Withdrawal of U.S. Forces in Vietnam 1962–1964,” p. vii.

deeper and of more consequence...the United States could not resolve its fundamental problems on intelligence in the war...In contrast, Hanoi's good intelligence helped pave its way to victory in 1975."²⁵

Vietnam intelligence: qualities, roles and explanations

This study demonstrates that each of those interpretations represents parts of a complex picture of Vietnam intelligence. It shows that, across diverse subjects and organisations, the quality of intelligence varied significantly. On the positive side, the intelligence community produced relatively sound assessment of some issues, such as the coup plot in 1963 and the general trend in North Vietnam in 1964. Furthermore, compared to many senior personnel in Washington, the CIA and the INR had a more pessimistic view of the state of the counterinsurgency and of the benefits of direct U.S. military intervention. However, shortcomings were equally prevalent. To various degrees, assessments were, for example, missing or rudimentary (peasant attitude and the background of insurgents), inaccurate (the number of Strategic Hamlets), overly optimistic or pessimistic (the probable consequences of air strikes), oversimplified or one-sided (the geopolitics in Southeast Asia), and/or unintelligible to policymakers (intelligence inputs to the NSC Working Group in November 1964). In general, there were serious gaps and weaknesses in the knowledge of the National Liberation Front (NLF), the analysis of socio-political factors, the assessment of broad pictures of the conflict, and the prediction of policy outcomes. On top of these weaknesses, Vietnam intelligence had overall bias in favour of the government's justification for its Vietnam policy: the intelligence community challenged neither the description of the NLF as a Communist movement nor the domino theory.

The roles of intelligence in policy making also defy a general description. There were some occasions (such as the political instability in 1964) in which good intelligence helped policymakers to handle the situation. Also, as Ford, McCone and Cline emphasise, there were cases in which relatively sound judgments of analysts were ignored by policymakers. In many areas, however, the absence of robust intelligence did undermine the quality of Vietnam policy. The weak analysis of socio-political factors, for example, was a part of the unsuccessful efforts to win the hearts and minds of the rural community. During the political crisis in 1963, policymakers did not receive proper analysis regarding the probable consequences of a regime change, making it easier for the State Department to go ahead with a military coup. Likewise, analysts' failure to emphasize Hanoi's determination to

²⁵ Prados, "Impatience, Illusion, and Asymmetry: Intelligence in Vietnam," p. 150.

support southern insurgents facilitated the advocates of escalation to prevail in 1965. The CIA's focus on the geopolitical threats (rather than opportunities) in Southeast Asia can be seen as one of the reasons why policymakers did not make a serious effort to explore other policy options in the region that might have allowed the United States to withdraw from South Vietnam without a major geopolitical setback. The general failure to analyse the complex problems in South Vietnam can help explain the misguided efforts to improve the situation with a relatively simple solution (such as the aggressive use of air power against insurgents in 1962, the overthrow of President Diem in 1963, and the military action against North Vietnam in 1965). The overall bias in favour of Washington's justification for its Vietnam policy also reinforced the belief that the United States should and could win the conflict.

The possible causes of those intelligence-related problems are wide-ranging, and many of them related to the broad contexts of Vietnam policy. They include the competence, character and personal background of key individuals (such as Robert McNamara, John McCone, Gen. Paul Harkins and Ambassador Frederick Nolting); problems in technical aspects of intelligence analysis (notably, analytical challenges and limitations inherent to each subject, the lack of information and knowledge, and the absence of a proper strategic framework for counterinsurgency); organizational and procedural weaknesses (including the shortage of resources and expertise, the lack of an effective cross-departmental coordination mechanism, and the absence of a clear separation between intelligence and policymaking); political pressures and considerations (bureaucratic rivalry and disputes, and the need to maintain the morale of friendly forces and to justify the U.S. involvement in the conflict); and the wider "national security culture" of the 1960s (such as the Cold War ideology and the relatively low status of intelligence in Kennedy and Johnson's foreign policy).

2. Complexity, uncertainty and international security

Complexity, uncertainty and foreign policy decision-making

As already suggested, one theme that this study attempts to explore in particular is the difficulty of making a reality-based foreign policy in the face of a highly complex and unpredictable security issue. This is not only a central challenge for Vietnam policymakers (as Hans Morgenthau, Howard Zinn and McGeorge Bundy recognise in their works cited earlier) but also a widely discussed subject in the literature on foreign policy and national security.

The notions of complexity and uncertainty (as well as other related concepts, such as diversity and ambiguity) have been a part of policy studies since its emergence as a field of academic inquiry in the 1950s. As Wayne Parsons points out, Harold Lasswell, a founding father of the discipline, envisaged an ideal policy process not as a technocratic search for a solution based on undisputable facts or statistics but rather as a democratic mechanism to accommodate the diverse perspectives of society, which seem almost inevitable on most of the major socio-political issues.²⁶ It was also in the mid-twentieth century that, in his article “The Science of Muddling Through” (1959), Charles Lindblom set forward an incremental approach to decision-making on the assumption that, when handling a complex issue which is not yet fully understood, a method that incorporates adaptation and small-scale problem solving is more effective than one resting simply upon a grand design.²⁷ Those lines of inquiry have been followed up and further expanded by various branches of policy studies, including works on a “complex adaptive system.”²⁸ At the same time, however, the limits and pitfalls of those approaches (especially when a holistic vision and/or a drastic change of policy direction are required) have also been recognised. Christopher Hill, for example, points out that “Accepting the virtue of muddling through...can legitimize the unwillingness to ask fundamental questions and to criticize the general direction of policy.”²⁹

In parallel to those discussions on the ideal approach, scholars have also examined how policymakers actually respond to a complex, unpredictable situation. From a cognitive-psychological point of view, *Judgement under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (1982) by Kahneman, Slovic and Tversky examines the way in which people process information in an environment of risk and uncertainty.³⁰ In 2008, Janice Stein reviewed similar studies in the field of foreign policy and concluded that “likely states of the world are very difficult to estimate because we do not have repeated trials with large numbers in world politics...This world of uncertainty is one they [foreign policy specialists] particularly dislike and it is

²⁶ Wayne Parsons, “From Muddling Thought to Muddling Up: Evidence Based Policy Making and the Modernization of British Government,” *Public Policy and Administration*, vol. 17, no. 3 (Autumn 2002), pp. 43, 53-56.

²⁷ Charles Lindblom, “The Science of Muddling Through,” *Public Administration Review*, vol. 19, no. 2 (Spring 1959).

²⁸ See for example: Donald Schön, *Beyond the Stable State: Public and Private Learning in a Changing Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973); Ralph Tracy, *Complex Responsive Processes in Organizations: Learning and Knowledge Creation* (London: Routledge, 2001).

²⁹ Christopher Hill, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), p. 104.

³⁰ Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic and Amos Tversky, *Judgement under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

under these conditions that experts, just like other people, seek the certainty, the false certainty, of order and control.”³¹ Political hurdles set up against an effective response to a complex, uncertain reality have also been discussed in terms of both bureaucratic and domestic political pressures to make one’s claim simpler and more assertive.³²

In studies of national security, chaos and unpredictability have been familiar subjects for military strategists since the publication of Clausewitz’s *On War* in 1832.³³ However, his caution against a simple, mechanical view of military operations has repeatedly been ignored by commanders and strategists, including those who promoted the notion of “Revolution in Military Affairs” (RMA) in the 1990s. After the victory in the first Gulf War in 1991, some parts of the U.S. defence establishment began to hope that new technologies (such as the global positioning system and long-range precision strikes) could diminish uncertainty and ensure a near-perfect view of the battlefield in the wars that the United States would fight in the twenty-first century.³⁴ “The digitalization of the army represents the end of Clausewitz,” a senior army general declared in the mid-1990s. “[We are] entering the non-Clausewitzian world,” echoed Lt. Gen. Kenneth Minihan (former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, DIA).³⁵ Alarmed by this trend and aware of the reality of the Chechen War in the 1990s, leading military thinkers such as Williamson Murray, Stephen Cimbala and Colin Gray, made a case for the continuing relevance of the Clausewitzian approach.³⁶ The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan seem to vindicate their arguments that technology cannot be an answer to political and strategic questions, and that many of the sources of uncertainty identified by Clausewitz (such as chance, insufficient knowledge and the

³¹ Janice Stein, “Foreign Policy Decision-making: Rational, Psychological, and Neurological Model,” in Steven Smith, Amelia Hadfield, and Time Dunne eds., *Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 107.

³² Thomas Christiansen, for example, demonstrates that President Truman accepted what some of his advisors feared was an unrealistically simplistic form of the containment policy in the late 1940s in order to mobilise his country in the face of the growing threat from the USSR. Thomas Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) p. 32. See also: Thomas Hughes, “On the Causes of Our Discontents,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 47, no. 4 (July 1969).

³³ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976 [1832]).

³⁴ See in particular: William Owen, *Lifting the Fog of War* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000).

³⁵ Both quotations are from: Stephen Cimbala, *Clausewitz and Chaos: Friction in War and Military Policy* (Westport: Praeger, 2001), p. 5.

³⁶ Williamson Murray, “Thinking about Revolution in Military Affairs,” *Joint Forth Quarterly*, 16 (Summer 1997), pp. 69-76; Williamson Murray, “Military Culture Does Matter,” *Strategic Review*, 27 (Spring 1999), pp. 32-40; Stephen Cimbala, *Clausewitz and Chaos: Friction in War and Military Policy* (Westport: Praeger, 2001); Colin Gray, *Strategy for Chaos: Revolution in Military Affairs and the Evidence of History* (London: Frank Cass, 2002).

adversarial nature of warfare) will remain integral parts of military operations.

In contrast, those working on the broader question of national security strategy (which includes geopolitics and diplomacy) already showed a growing interest in the potentially chaotic nature of international politics in the early 1990s. “Complexity, Global Politics and National Security Conference” in 1996 suggested that this trend stemmed from two main factors: development in other disciplines (such as the chaos theory and non-linear dynamics in science) and the perceived fluidity in international politics since the fall of the USSR.³⁷ Many works published around that time discuss relatively passive ways of coping with an unpredictable situation (maintaining strategic flexibility and organisational adaptability, for example). Some scholars and practitioners, however, supported more active solutions, such as “environmental shaping,” which was, according to Paul Davis, emphasised by Dick Cheney in his document *The Regional Defense Strategy* in 1993.³⁸ This may not be unrelated to the “you are either with us or the terrorists” approach of the U.S. government after 11 September 2001.³⁹ Even in this atmosphere of simplicity and control in the early 2000s, however, many in Washington continued to recognise the world as turbulent and unpredictable. As DIA Director Thomas Wilson reported to the Senate Armed Services Committee in March 2002:

[T]he general turmoil and uncertainty prevalent since the end of the Cold War would continue through the next decade...Accounting for and dealing with uncertainty has always been our biggest analytical challenge. But in today's environment, we need to be as adept at dealing with 'complex mysteries' as well as at uncovering 'hidden secret'.⁴⁰

As this DIA report accentuates, uncertainty – and the limits of intelligence in general – has been a key issue in intelligence studies. This is not to deny that much of the discussion in this field has been devoted to what intelligence can, rather than

³⁷ The conference was organized jointly by the National Defense University and RAND corporation. Davis Alberts and Thomas Czerwinski, eds., *Complexity, Global Politics, and National Security* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 1997).

³⁸ Paul Davis, “Uncertainty-Sensitive Planning,” in Stuart Johnson, Martin Libicki, and Gregory Treverton eds., *New Challenges, New Tools for Defense Decisionmaking* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2003), p. 138, footnote 11.

³⁹ Dennis Sandole regards the U.S. foreign policy in the first half of the 2000s as a classic example of “extreme” *Realpolitik*, which tries to enhance predictability and stability through the creation of a bi-polar system of “them” and “us” and through the threatened or actual use of military forces against “them.” Dennis Sandole, “Complexity and Conflict Resolution,” in Neil Harrison ed., *Complexity in World Politics: Concepts and Methods of a New Paradigm* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 57.

⁴⁰ Thomas Wilson (the Director of Defense Intelligence Agency), Statement for the Record, Senate Armed Services Committee, “Global Threats and Challenges” (19 March 2002), pp. 1-2, 26.

cannot, do for national security. A central point of Sherman Kent's classic *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy* (1949) is that intelligence estimates based on "the indexes of strategic stature, specific vulnerability, and probable courses of action" are not only more reliable than "the only alternative, i.e. the crystal ball" but also had been "astonishingly close to what actually came to pass."⁴¹ Well-known cases of intelligence success (such as the Allies' signal intelligence during the Second World War⁴²) have kept true to Sun Tzu's dictum that "if you know your enemies and know yourself, you will not be imperilled in a hundred battles."⁴³

At the same time, however, it has also been recognised that a reasonably accurate understanding of enemies and other factors in international politics is not always possible. Kent contributed to this field of inquiry as well by making a distinction between the known, the knowable and the unknowable. A growing volume of case studies on intelligence failures (including a series of strategic surprises and the failure to predict the fall of the Soviet Union) has helped determine many of the practical hurdles to accurate and timely assessment.⁴⁴ Those constraints include, among many others, the lack of reliable information, the problems of noise, and the limits of objective interpretation of socio-political facts. The problem of uncertainty is particularly imminent in intelligence estimates, which analyse broad pictures, long-term prospects and probable consequences of policy options. This is partly because, as Donald Steury points out, the assessment of these issues "could not be proved, however well-founded they might be in experience or factual or theoretical knowledge."⁴⁵

⁴¹ Sherman Kent, *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), p. 60.

⁴² For the signal intelligence in the Second World War, see for example: F. Harry Hinsley, *et. al.*, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, vols. 1–4 (London: HMSO, 1979-90); David Alvarez, ed., *Allied and Axis Signal Intelligence in World War II* (London: Frank Cass, 1999); Ralph Bennett, *Intelligence Investigations: How Ultra Changed History*, (London: Frank Cass, 1996); W.J.R. Gardner, *Decoding history : the battle of the Atlantic and Ultra* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1999). See also: Gregory Elder, "Intelligence in War: It Can Be Decisive," *Studies in Intelligence*, vol. 50, no. 2 (2006).

⁴³ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. John Minford (London: Penguin, 2009), III. 18.

⁴⁴ For intelligence failure, see for example: Richard Betts, "Analysis, War and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable," *World Politics*, vol. 31, no. 1 (1978); Mark Lowenthal, "The Burdensome Concept of Failure," in Alfred Maurer, Marion Tunstall and James Keagle, eds., *Intelligence: Policy and Process* (Boulder: Westview, 1985); Robert Jervis, "Reports, Politics, and Intelligence Failures: the Case of Iraq," *the Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1 (February 2006); Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

⁴⁵ Donald Steury, "Introduction" in Sherman Kent, *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimate: Collected Essays* (Washington DC: Center for the Studies of Intelligence, 1996). See also: Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), "Too Much Certainty," pp. 126-127.

This limited reliability of intelligence – and policymakers’ perception of it – complicates the intelligence-policy relation. It requires careful communication of complex pictures and various probabilities to policymakers often unfamiliar with the subject in hand. At the same time, the risk of intelligence being “politicized” (in the form of, for example, distortion, dismissal or “cherry-picking”) can also increase when assessments are ambiguous, complex or inconclusive.⁴⁶ Recent history has also indicated that the discussion of uncertainty itself – or the “unknown unknown” – can be abused by policymakers for political purposes.⁴⁷

Those practical problems at the national level have no small implications for international efforts to maintain order and stability. The key approaches to international peace and security (notably the Just War paradigm and the Democratic Peace theory) depend on the government’s and/or the public’s ability to make sound judgments on relevant factors (such as the imminence of threats and the probable consequences of military action): so too does the application of any other normative concepts. It is a sobering reminder that some of the most prominent advocates of “ethical foreign policy” and humanitarian causes (including Michael Ignatieff and the *Guardian* newspaper) supported what they believed to be the “liberation of the Iraqi people” in the run-up to the Iraq War in 2003, only to realise years later that the invasion actually caused a humanitarian crisis. In his article “Getting Iraq Wrong” (2007), Ignatieff, a former Harvard professor, reflects:

I’ve learned that good judgment in politics looks different from good judgment in intellectual life. Among intellectuals, judgment is about generalizing and interpreting particular facts as instances of some big idea. In politics, everything is what it is and not another thing. Specifics matter more than generalities...The attribute that underpins good judgment in politicians is a sense of reality...They must not confuse the world as it is with the world as they wish it to be.⁴⁸

It is no coincidence that, in international relations theory, Classical Realism has enjoyed a minor resurgence in recent years. “Realism was partly rehabilitated, albeit in a more pluralistic form. Meanwhile, the consistent realist hostility to the Iraq War rekindled interest in the normative dimensions of realism,” wrote Duncan Bell in 2009. One of the images of realism that has emerged from this process of

⁴⁶ Thomas Hughes, “On the Causes of Our Discontents,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 47, no. 4 (July 1969), pp. 653-67.

⁴⁷ DOD News Briefing, Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers (12 February 2002), News Transcript, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, U.S. Department of Defense, <<http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2636>> accessed 25 Sept 2010.

⁴⁸ Michael Ignatieff, “Getting Iraq Wrong,” *New York Times Magazine* (5 August 2007).

rehabilitation is an “attitude towards the world’ of a truth-seeking kind” with critical edges and ethical undertones, as opposed to the old stamp of state-centric *Realpolitik* irreconcilable with morality.⁴⁹

Whatever directions this new interest in Classical Realism takes in the future, though, the term “realism” itself always presupposes, as Alastair Murray puts it, “an intimate involvement with ‘the facts as they really are.’”⁵⁰ The diverse literature outlined above indicates that, in the environment of complexity and uncertainty, fulfilling that very basic principle can be a rather difficult task for policymakers. This suggests that realism has to be examined first and foremost as a realm of challenges and problems rather than simply presented as a solution.

Vietnam intelligence and the failure of realism

In an attempt to highlight some of the key obstacles to realism in foreign policy, this study explores three broad issues: the difficulties of producing a solid, fact-based assessment of foreign affairs (in terms of both the current reality and future possibilities); the ease with which one’s factual judgement can be distorted or marginalized by other, non-factual elements in foreign policy (such as ideas, theories, prejudices, political pressures and normative reasoning); and the tension between the complexity and uncertainty of reality and the simplicity and assertiveness often central to the world of politics.

It suggests that, in the case of Vietnam policy, a result of those problems was a mixture of cognitive/intellectual flaws (such as exaggeration, wishful thinking, logical leaps, and insufficient attention to details) in the general understanding of the conflict rather than a simple case of inaccuracy regarding enemy intentions and capabilities.⁵¹ This generic form of perceptive failure helps explain why neither

⁴⁹ Duncan Bell, “Introduction,” in Duncan Bell ed., *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 2, 10. For the recent, positive reappraisal of Classical Realism, see for example: Michael Williams, *The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Seán Molloy, *The Hidden History of Realism: A Genealogy of Power Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). For critical overview of Classical Realism, see for example: Chris Brown and Kirsten Ainley, *Understanding International Relations*, 4th edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 23-30.

⁵⁰ Alastair Murray, *Reconstructing Realism: Between Power Politics and Cosmopolitan Ethics* (Edinburgh: Keele University Press, 1997), p. 2.

⁵¹ In the studies of international security, the difficulty of knowing the enemy’s intentions and capabilities has been seen as a major cause of war and a source of general insecurity in international politics (known as the “security dilemma”). In his classic *Why Nations Go to War* (8th edition, 2001), for example, John Stoessinger concludes: “perhaps the most important single precipitating factor in the outbreak of war is misperception. Such distortion may manifest itself in four different ways: in a leader’s image of himself; a leader’s view of his adversary’s character; a leader’s view of his adversary’s intentions toward himself; and finally, a leader’s view of his adversary’s capabilities and power.” Similarly, in *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics* (2008) –

democratic scrutiny nor the Just War paradigm could prevent the outbreak of the Vietnam War in 1965.

3. Scope and source

This study focuses on the intelligence assessments of the U.S. government relevant to its strategic decisions in the Vietnam conflict from December 1961 to February 1965.⁵² The term “intelligence assessment” is used here to describe information and knowledge produced and processed by government organisations with the aim of assisting policymaking. Based on this definition, the thesis examines documents that have at least one of the following functions: to offer background information (biographies of South Vietnamese ruling elites, for example), to report and/or analyse latest developments (situation reports and current intelligence), to provide an in-depth study of a specific issue (special reports), to assess the broader and long-term outlook of the conflict (intelligence estimates) and to predict the probable consequences of a particular policy option.

Most of those documents were produced by the Pentagon, the State Department and the CIA in the United States, as well as by the U.S. mission in South Vietnam, which included the Military Assistant Command Vietnam (MACV), the U.S. Embassy, the US Operation Mission (USOM), the US Information Agency (USIA) and the CIA Saigon Station (CAS).

Not all of their intelligence products are available to researchers. Declassified materials from the CIA’s operational wing (the Directorate of Plans) and the National Security Agency (NSA) remain particularly sparse due to these agencies’ exemption from the Freedom of Information Act.⁵³ The information on those two organisations, therefore, comes primarily from declassified studies completed by researchers with access to classified materials.⁵⁴ Internal documents

arguably the most important recent contribution to the subject – Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler emphasise the “significance of accurate threat assessment” and argue: “It is more difficult to gauge intentions...than extrapolate capabilities...All the uncertainties surrounding a state’s present and future motives and intentions feed...the predisposition of so many theorists and practitioners to assert, fatalistically, that pessimistic calculations must always prevail when interpreting and responding to the weaponry of potential rivals.” John Stoessinger, *Why Nations Go to War*, 8th edition (Boston: Bedford / St Martin’s, 2001), p. 255; Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 58-60.

⁵² This means that the thesis does not investigate other tasks of the U.S. intelligence community, such as intelligence collection, counterintelligence, intelligence liaison, covert operations and intelligence activities at the tactical and operational levels.

⁵³ The Director of Plans was renamed Directorate of Operations in 1973.

⁵⁴ For the Directorate of Plans, see: Thomas Ahern, *CIA and the Generals: Covert Support to Military Government in South Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1999); Thomas Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo* (Washington, DC: Center

of other organizations – including the CIA’s analytical branch (the Directorate of Intelligence and the Office of National Estimates), the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) – are more widely available. However, it is difficult to assess the volume of materials still classified and the possible bias in the pattern of declassification.

It appears, in contrast, that a significant portion of the intelligence materials that were circulated across departmental boundaries can now be found in the files of senior policymakers such as McGeorge Bundy, John McNaughton, James Thompson and Roger Hilsman. Although the government remains reluctant to release some cables, memos and studies, the declassified documents offer a fairly clear picture of the intelligence products that were used as a basis for policy discussions.

4. Chronology

Nearly three decades of conflict and disunity followed Vietnam’s declaration of independence from France in 1945. The First Indochinese War between France and Vietnamese nationalists (the Viet Minh) broke out in late 1946 when French forces bombarded the city of Haiphong, killing around six thousand Vietnamese and triggering Vietnamese attacks on French strongholds throughout the Red River Delta. The fighting continued until mid-1954, when France accepted its defeat and signed the Geneva Accord. The agreement officially ended the war, guaranteed the departure of French forces, and divided Vietnam into two sections, South Vietnam (the RVN) and North Vietnam (the DRV).

This left the United States as the primary sponsor of the South Vietnamese government (the GVN) led by President Ngo Dinh Diem. During his first three years in office, Diem and his supporters successfully contained the major threats to the central government, an achievement widely praised in the United States as the “Diem miracle.” However, the situation deteriorated rapidly after the ill-judged land reform in 1957. This reactionary policy allowed the opponents of the regime to re-establish their popular bases, leading to the creation of the National Liberation Front (NLF) and the start of an armed campaign against the Saigon

for the Study of Intelligence, 2000); Thomas Ahern, *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2001); Thomas Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified: The CIA and Counterinsurgency* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009). For the NSA’s studies on the Gulf of Tonkin incident, see: Robert Hanyok, “Shunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds and the Flying Fish: the Gulf of Tonkin Mystery2–4 August 1964,” *Cryptologic Quarterly* (2001); Robert Hanyok, *Spartans in Darkness: American SIGINT and the Indochina War, 1945-1975* (Center for Cryptologic History, National Security Agency, 2002).

regime.⁵⁵

In response, President Kennedy decided to step up U.S. support for the GVN in December 1961. The decision was followed by the creation of a new U.S. command (the Military Assistance Command Vietnam, MACV) and the introduction of new projects designed to contain the insurgency. By late 1964, those efforts had proven largely unsuccessful, with the NLF estimated to be in control of nearly half of the South Vietnamese territory. In the hope of turning the tide, President Johnson authorized air strikes against North Vietnam in February 1965, which led to the introduction of U.S. combat forces during the following months. The U.S. troops continued to fight on the frontline until Washington signed the Paris Peace Accord and withdrew its forces in 1973. Saigon fell two years later just after the evacuation of the U.S. embassy on 29–30 April 1975.

This study focuses on the period from December 1961 to February 1965, during which the U.S. advisory mission failed to help the GVN to contain the insurgency and the U.S. government ended up in a direct military intervention in the Vietnam conflict. Those three-odd years can be divided into three stages, which roughly correspond to 1962, 1963 and 1964.

December 1961 - November 1962: During the year following Kennedy's decision in December 1961 to expand U.S. support for the GVN, the assessment of the counterinsurgency fluctuated significantly, and ended up with widespread optimism in the Vietnam policy community. Reports during the earlier part of the year (January–May 1962) were dominated by the progress in new programmes such as the administrative reform of the GVN. During the early summer (June–July), however, the flaws and limitations of those initiatives became more obvious and were duly reported to senior policymakers. The atmosphere once again turned more sanguine around August when the GVN began to use aerial strikes more aggressively, went ahead with a rapid expansion of Strategic Hamlets and intensified its efforts to manipulate information flows to the U.S. government. By late 1962, these developments had drawn attention away from the underlying problems of the GVN, leading to the spread of optimism in the U.S. mission and of

⁵⁵ For the Vietnam conflict before 1961, see for example: Mark Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Martin Shipway, *The Road to War: France and Vietnam, 1944-47* (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1996); Nicola Cooper, *France in Indochina. Colonial Encounters* (New York: Berg, 2001); Carlyle Thayer, *War by Other Means: National Liberation and Revolution in Viet-Nam, 1954-60* (Cambridge: Unwin Hyman, 1989); James Arnold, *The First Domino: Eisenhower, the Military and America's Intervention in Vietnam* (New York: William Morrow, 1991); David Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-1961* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

the generally positive view in some parts of Washington.

December 1962 - November 1963: The misguided confidence in late 1962 was followed by a year-long dispute over the state of the counterinsurgency, which was later intertwined with disagreement over the U.S. response to the political crisis (May–November 1963). The dispute originated in late 1962 when analysts in the INR and the CIA began to question the optimism of the U.S. mission and the JCS. Their low-key attempts from February to April 1963 to highlight negative aspects of GVN/U.S. operations, however, failed to change the prevailing view of the administration. By coincidence, this was followed by the outbreak of Buddhist protests in May 1963, which spiralled into general political instability in the RVN. Convinced that the counterinsurgency was not going well and that much of the U.S. government did not understand the reality, the State Department began to plot a regime change without proper consultation with other departments. Its contingency plan and fence-sitting during June and July led to the unsuccessful push for a coup d'état in late August. This resulted in an open dispute in the National Security Council (NSC) in September 1963 between the Pentagon (which insisted that the counterinsurgency was going well and therefore a regime change was unnecessary) and the State Department (which argued that the United States needed a new regime in Saigon to reverse the deteriorating situation in the countryside). Although the President managed to restore a degree of unity in his administration by sending a cross-departmental mission to Saigon in late September to early October, Washington remained divided over its basic policy direction right up until the assassinations of President Diem and his brother Nhu during the military coup in early November 1963. Three weeks later, Kennedy was also assassinated.

November 1963 - February 1965: Developments during the following months made it clear that the counterinsurgency in the countryside had not been successful and was rapidly deteriorating further, and that the South Vietnamese junta was far less capable of running the country than the supporters of the regime change had predicted. From this context of shock and confusion during the winter emerged the idea of military action against North Vietnam, which dominated the policy debate for the rest of 1964. The first round of inquiries into this policy option in the spring of 1964 did not lead to its immediate implementation, partly because the result of those discussions proved indecisive and the President remained reluctant to expand the U.S. role before the end of the 1964 presidential campaign. The pressure for escalation increased during the summer, nonetheless, as the counterinsurgency continued to stumble, the GVN stepped up its “March North” campaign, the Gulf of Tonkin incident raised expectations among the South

Vietnamese of further U.S. commitment, and the GVN plunged into another round of political crisis. After the presidential election on 2 November, an interdepartmental working group in the NSC carried out a month-long review of Vietnam policy. Despite some disagreement and opposition, its final report set the stage for air strikes against the DRV, which were implemented in early February 1965.

5. Thesis structure

The thesis has two main parts. Part One (Chapters 2 - 4) examines the failure of the counterinsurgency from December 1961 to November 1963 under the leadership of President Kennedy in Washington and President Diem in Saigon. Chapter 2 investigates the changing atmosphere and the rise of optimism in 1962. Chapters 3 and 4 both analyse events in 1963: intelligence disputes over the state of the counterinsurgency (Chapter 3) and the intelligence community's responses to the political crisis mainly in urban areas (Chapter 4).

Part Two (Chapters 5 - 8) examines the period between the regime changes in November 1963 and the decision for air strikes in February 1965. Chapter 5 analyses the five months following the fall of the Diem regime (from November 1963 to March 1964) when intelligence showed the negative trend and structural problems in the GVN/U.S. war efforts but policymakers decided not to consider a diplomatic solution or a radically new approach to counterinsurgency. The following three chapters examine the development from April 1964 to February 1965, investigating the intelligence on South Vietnam (Chapter 6), the assessment of the intentions and capabilities of North Vietnam (Chapter 7) and intelligence's role in policymaking (Chapter 8).

The concluding chapter (Chapter 9) briefly sums up the key findings and considers their implications for understanding the origins of the Vietnam War and the study of international security.

Chapter 2

Counterinsurgency: Rise of Optimism, 1962

When the United States became the primary ally of South Vietnam in 1954, CIA analysts had relatively low expectations. “Even assuming that the US and the UK were willing to give full support to a South Vietnamese state and to guarantee its integrity and that France was willing to relinquish its political and economic dominance,” a CIA memo warned in July 1954, “it would be extremely difficult to organize an effective Vietnamese government in the chaotic situation which would undoubtedly exist following the signing of a cease-fire agreement between the French and the Communists.” This conclusion was based on the judgement that the viability of South Vietnam as a nation-state depended upon whether its government could meet the following conditions:

- a. That the government of South Vietnam receive international recognition and support.
- b. That the line between North and South Vietnam and the border of Laos and Cambodia be secured.
- c. That South Vietnam be independent of France and that this be manifested in terms visible to the average Vietnamese.
- d. That the government be capable of providing physical security to the Vietnamese.
- e. That the government achieve short-term economic viability.
- f. That the new South Vietnam government quickly establish a reputation for honesty and efficiency.
- g. That the Vietnamese provide a few leaders and a large number of honest and competent administrators.¹

Although the initial success of the Diem regime from 1954 to 1956 appeared to disprove the memo’s negative prediction, most of those seven points remained valid indicators of the long-term viability of the GVN. In fact, the growing difficulty for the GVN after the creation of the National Liberation Front (NLF) in 1959 can partly be explained in the light of these “critical factors” the CIA had identified in 1954. Although Saigon’s independence from France had become clear to the average Vietnamese by the late 1950s, the growing support from the United States left the GVN vulnerable to accusations of being a puppet of Western imperialism. The steady expansion of the Ho Chi Minh trail had made South Vietnam’s borders less secure against enemy infiltration. Providing physical security to the rural community became increasingly difficult as dissidents

¹ Memo, CIA to DCI, “Critical Factors Underlying the Viability of a South Vietnam State (for Board Consideration)” (12 July 1954), NA, CREST 79R00904A000200010023-3.

switched from a “peaceful struggle” to armed campaigns. The image of the South Vietnamese administration was hardly one of honesty and efficiency, and one of the main objectives of the USOM-endorsed training of local administrators in 1962 was to change the attitude of government employees in order to “encourage private individuals to consider government officials as friends and helpers rather than as tyrants never to be approached.”²

It was the process of marginalising those and other basic problems for the GVN that gave rise to optimism in the U.S. government in 1962. This was despite, and partly because of, the fact that by mid-1962, some of the problems – notably the flaws in the Strategic Hamlet programme, the weaknesses of the South Vietnamese forces, and peasant apathy toward the GVN – had become obvious, creating widespread concern within the U.S. government about the future of the GVN. Around August 1962, however, policymakers’ attention was diverted from basic socio-political problems and became dominated by two outwardly positive developments: the greater use of air power against insurgents and the rapid expansion of the Strategic Hamlet programme. This resulted in a sharp rise of optimism in the U.S. mission and a growing confidence in the policy community in Washington in late 1962. As a result of this focus on what the U.S. mission considered as progress, the U.S. government missed an opportunity to mitigate the negative effects of air strikes and strategic hamlets and to tackle the problems that had been reported in mid-1962.

The immediate cause of this reporting failure lay in the GVN’s – and to lesser but significant extent the U.S. mission’s – attempts to counter both the war weariness among the friendly forces and the criticism by the U.S. media (through the hasty expansion of air strikes and strategic hamlets as well as the manipulation of information flow to Washington). At the same time, the overconfidence in late 1962 also reflected the underlying weaknesses in Vietnam intelligence. The poor intelligence on many of the key issues (such as the strength of the NLF and the attitude of the rural community), the absence of National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) and the lack of methodological consensus as to how the conflict should be analysed all facilitated the rise of optimism in late 1962.

1. Sources of intelligence failures

In 1962 Vietnam intelligence made progress in some areas, including in particular

² Memo, Knox to Hilsman, “The Joint American-Vietnamese Program for the Training of Local Government Officials” (1 Feb 1962), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, “Vietnam, 1/62–2/62,” #2.

tactical intelligence, regular reports and military statistics. By mid-1962, army and naval intelligence schools had introduced new courses on unconventional conflict.³ In Saigon, the CIA was working with the GVN to improve the latter's intelligence apparatus,⁴ while, according to CINCPAC, a grass-roots intelligence system on the front line was being "refined and perfected" by the MACV.⁵ As to regular reporting, the Embassy, the MACV and the CIA Saigon Station had their formats for weekly and/or monthly report to Washington, where the State Department, the Pentagon and the CIA were to send weekly summary of progress (Status Report) to the White House.⁶ At the same time, the Order of Battle statistics, which listed comparative strength and casualties of the friendly and enemy forces, came to dominate the reports from the MACV and the briefing in the Pentagon.

In contrast, the U.S. government made comparatively little effort to systematically analyse the qualitative aspects of military operations (including the quality and morale of the South Vietnamese forces⁷) and socio-political issues

³ The U.S. army intelligence schools at Fort Holabird (Maryland) and Washington, D.C., for example, provided "a broad basis for service-wide capabilities in the field of counterinsurgency." The US Army Pacific Intelligence School in Okinawa offered similar courses on counterinsurgency with more emphasis on the specific region. Likewise, in February 1962, "The Naval Intelligence School includes 42 hour [sic] on unconventional warfare in the Post Graduate Course (40 weeks – 50 students), and 20 hour [sic] in the Air Intelligence Course (32 weeks – 100 students)." Memo, Army, "Intelligence Aspect of Counterinsurgency Operations" (n.d.), JFKL, NSF, Departments and Agencies, Box 279, "Department of Defense (B) Subjects, Special Warfare, Miscellaneous Reports"; Memo, Department of Defense, "Guerrilla Warfare and Related Matters: Department of Defense Status Report" (19 Feb 1962), JFKL, NSF, Department and Agencies, Box 279, "Department of Defense (B) Subjects, Special Warfare, 8/61–2/62," #16c.

⁴ Memo for the Special Group (CI), "Intelligence Collection and Evaluation in South Vietnam" (25 June 1962), JFKL, NSF, Meetings and Memoranda, Box 319, "Special Group (CI) Subjects, Meetings, 6/8/61–11/2/62," #44b.

⁵ "The carious uncoordinated military and civilian intelligence activities are being welded into a coordinated collecting and reporting system...The reporting procedures are being refined and perfected. The opportunity to test, developed and evaluate the use of special equipment and techniques, such as aerial photography, surveillance radar and radio research equipment, is being seized." Cable, CINCPAC to JCS, "Report on Value and Means for Taking Maximum Advantage of Preset Conflict in South Vietnam Toward Increasing U.S. Capabilities for this Type Warfare" (20 March 1962), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 7, "March 1962: 5–20." See also: Cable, MAAG to CINCPAC (10 Jan 1962), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 7, "January 1962: 9–15."

⁶ "The requirement for bi-weekly reports on Presidential approved action for South Viet-Nam is reduced to a single weekly report. It is requested that this report reach the White House by noon each Thursday." Memo, M. Bundy to Johnson, W. Bundy and Fitzgerald, "Frequency of reporting on South Viet-Nam actions" (8 Dec 1961), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 6, "Dec.1961: 7–8."

⁷ For example, Ben Ward (the chief of the Eastern Division, the Office of Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence) cabled Col. John P. Jones (an army attaché at Saigon Embassy) on 3 December 1962: "We still present a Vietnam highlight every week at the ACSI briefing for the Secretary of the Army together with a running comparison of incidents and casualties. Your weekly cable containing these statistics forms the basis for this presentation, and we are constantly being called on to provide similar data to other intelligence agencies and staff officers. Along this same line, it would be appreciated if you could also include statistics comparing weapons lost and captured. Comparisons of losses are becoming an item of increasing interest here...We cannot stress too strongly, however,

(such as the administrative problems of the GVN and the attitude of the rural community⁸), even though those issues were analysed in some documents on an ad-hoc basis. Intelligence on the NLF remained equally rudimentary. Due to the effective counterintelligence measures of the NLF, the main source of information on insurgents remained a limited number of captured documents and interrogations of POWs.⁹ In addition, as the intelligence community produced no National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on South Vietnam in 1962, there was a general gap in intelligence that could provide a broad picture of the conflict and convey the view of the U.S. intelligence community as a whole.

Those weaknesses can partly be explained by the absence of methodological consensus on how this type of conflict should be analysed. In April 1962, the Special Group for Counter-Insurgency within the National Security Council (NSC) did initiate a cross-departmental inquiry into “Intelligence Requirements for Counterinsurgency.” This exercise resulted in the memo “Essential Elements of Information for Counterinsurgency” in August 1962. This document, however, was designed to identify the potential threat of insurgency in a relatively stable country and therefore largely irrelevant to South Vietnam, where a guerrilla war was already taking place.¹⁰ At the same time, the lack of a strategic consensus for the

the importance of your evaluations of information which you submit. For instance, your CX-637 on the reorganization of the RVNAF...noted that the plan was in accordance with recommendations from MACV, but we still have no idea what impact this reorganization may have on the counter-insurgency effort as a whole, on morale, or on the RVNAF relations with the civil side of government...As a matter of routine, we receive only the daily OPSUMS and DISUMS from MACV. As a rule, these present only the bare facts and do not provide sufficient data on which to base estimates of the situation nor do they indicate GVN intentions in either political or military fields. Anything you can do to expand our source material in these areas would be appreciated.” Cable, Ward to Jones (3 Dec 1962), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 10, “Dec. 1962: 7–31.”

⁸ In September 1962, Robert Johnson discussed the need for a system to evaluate peasant attitude. Memo, Johnson to Cottrell, “Measuring the Extent of Progress in the Countryside in Viet Nam” (11 Sept 1962), NA, RG330, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (OASD/ISA), Secret and Below General Files, 1962, Box 108, “Vietnam, 1962, 092, July–Dec.”

⁹ For the security measures of the VC, see for example: Truong Nhu Tang, *A Viet Cong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath* (New York: Vintage Book, 1986), pp. 75–79. For captured documents and interrogations of POWs, see for example: Memo, MACV, “Captured Viet Cong Document” (8 June 1962), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 8, “July 1962: 1–5”; Memo, MACV, “Captured Viet Cong Documents” (1 Dec 1962), JFKL, John Newman Papers, Box 10, “Dec. 1962: 1–4”; Memo (translation of captured VC documents), MACV J-2, “Viet-Cong squads, platoons and Companies” (12 Sept 1963), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 14, “12 Sept. 1963”; Memo (translation of captured VC documents), MACV J-2, “Organizations of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam” (19 Sept 1963), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 15, “19 Sept. 1963.”

¹⁰ Memo for DCI, “DD/I Comments on General Krukal’s Memorandum for the Special Group (CI), ‘Intelligence Requirements for Counterinsurgency’” (11 April 1962), NA, CREST 80B01083A000100120018-3; Memo for USIB “Intelligence Required for Counterinsurgency” (15 Aug 1962), CREST 80B01083A000100100017-6; Memo, DOD, “Status of Military Counterinsurgency Program” (18 Sept 1963), Section VI “Counterinsurgency Intelligence,” JFKL, NSF, Departments and Agencies, Box 280,

Vietnam policy itself further increased the difficulty for the intelligence community to develop an analytical framework.¹¹ President Kennedy appeared to consider Roger Hilsman's memo "Strategic Concept for South Vietnam" (February 1962) as the U.S. strategy in the RVN, but it had at least two fundamental problems.¹² Firstly, Hilsman's idea drew upon Britain's experience in Malaya in the 1950s¹³ (rather than the more relevant experience of the French forces during the first Indochina War¹⁴) and centred upon the efforts to cut off the insurgents' access to the rural population. As a result it failed to consider some of the key challenges in South Vietnam that were not significant in Malaya (such as the tension between the rural community and the central government, and the nationalist appeal of the NLF).¹⁵ Secondly, while the memo's core principle – the primacy of the socio-political dimension – might be sound, it was not shared by the GVN and the

"Department of Defense (B) Status of Military Counterinsurgency Programs, 9/18/63, Part VI and Part VII." For the discussion on this issue within the CIA, see CREST, job number 80B01083A, Box 1, Folder 10.

¹¹ The other major documents on strategy in 1962 include the Viet-Nam Task Force's "Outline Plan of Counterinsurgency Operations." John Newman, *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), pp. 179–180.

¹² Memo, Hilsman, "Strategic Concept for South Vietnam" (2 Feb 1962), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, "Vietnam, A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam, 2/2/62," #4.

¹³ Malaya continued to be the model of U.S. operations. From Malaya, the US imported tactics such as the "food denial project" and the use of dogs to detect guerrilla forces, while both U.S. and South Vietnamese officers were trained at the British Jungle Warfare Course in Malaya in the early 1960s. Memo, "Note on Food Denial Programs during 1948–1960 Malayan Emergency" (21 Sept 1962), NA, RG330, OASD/ISA, Secret and Below General Files, 1962, Box 109 "Vietnam, 1962, 384–400.12"; Memo, DOD, "Guerrilla Warfare and Related Matters: Department of Defense Status Report" (19 Feb 1962), JFKL, NSF, Department and Agencies, Box 279, "Department of Defense (B) Subjects, Special Warfare, 8/61–2/62, #16c," p. 15.

¹⁴ Studies of the first Indochina War were available in early 1962. When France withdrew from Vietnam after the Geneva agreement in July 1954, the French high command compiled a three-volume study of its defeat. Copies of that study were passed to the United States. In the public domain, at least several major studies had been completed by 1962, and many more works were to be published during the 1960s. Prados, "Impatience, Illusion, and Asymmetry: Intelligence in Vietnam," p. 143; RAND, RM-2395, G. Tanham, "Doctrine and Tactics of Revolutionary Warfare: The Viet Minh in Indochina" (20 Sept 1959), JFKL, NSF, Regional Security, Box 215, "Far East, General, Doctrine and Tactics of Revolutionary Warfare, 3/61"; RAND, "Limited War Patterns: 1. Southeast Asia," JFKL, NSF, Box 231A, "Southeast Asia, General, RAND Report 'Limited War Patterns: 1. Southeast Asia' 7/63", #1; INR, RFE-14, "Summary of Principal Events in the History of Vietnam" (10 Jan 1962), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 23, "Southeast Asia, 1961–1966, Vietnam: General, 1/61–3/63."

¹⁵ George McGhee, chairman of State's Policy Planning Council, did emphasise the discrepancy between Malaya and Vietnam in November 1961, when he argued that "it is very important to bear in mind that no one of these campaigns [in Greece, Malaya and the Philippines] is directly compatible to the situation in Vietnam. In Malaya and the Philippines, there was no active contiguous sanctuary from which manpower and supplies could be furnished...Malaya was unique in that a colonial power (the UK) was involved; the campaign was against an ethnic minority (the Chinese); and the tactics of the Chinese guerrillas were more terrorist than guerrilla." Memo, McGhee to M. Bundy, "Counter-Guerrilla Campaigns in Greece, Malaya, and the Philippines" (21 Nov 1961), JFKL, NSF, Robert Komer, Box 414, "Counterinsurgency, Special Group, 2/61–4/61 and undated", #12.

Pentagon. Already in March 1962, Hilsman himself noted that the forced resettlement of the rural population indicated the GVN's "total misunderstanding" of what the joint socio-political-military project (Operation Sunrise) was designed to achieve.¹⁶ The MACV's growing reliance on air campaigns in mid-1962 also suggested that the "hearts and minds" aspect of counterinsurgency was not the priority of the Pentagon. This military-centric approach was confirmed in a speech given by Gen. Earle Wheeler (Army Chief of Staff) in November 1962, in which he said:

It is fashionable in some quarters to say that the problems in Southeast Asia are primarily political and economic, rather than military. I do not agree. The essence of the problem in Vietnam is military...At the present moment in Vietnam, the United State is assisting President Diem to develop military strength sufficient to permit that country's political, economic, and social potential to grow unmolested...The struggle in Southeast Asia, then, is a military struggle in a military context, with political and economic factors significant but not as significant at this moment, I think, as are the military factors.¹⁷

By early 1962, political pressures had also emerged as a threat to the objectivity of intelligence assessment. At the heart of the problem was that most of the information on South Vietnam available in Washington came through the U.S. mission, which was responsible for implementing policy. There the incentive to report positively and refute criticism was particularly strong for senior policymakers (such as Ambassador Nolting and Gen. Harkins) who were responsible for maintaining both the morale of the friendly forces and the GVN's confidence in the U.S. commitment. In this context, the critical reports from U.S. media (including the *New York Times*, *Newsweek* and NBC) became a growing concern for the U.S. government. Accordingly, in February 1962, the State Department instructed Nolting to persuade U.S. correspondents not to dispatch reports on "sensitive matters" (such as the MACV's involvement in combat operations which violated the Geneva agreement), "sensational press stories" about civilian casualties, and "frivolous, thoughtless criticism" of the GVN.¹⁸ The Embassy failed to extract "maximum feasible cooperation" from journalists, however, and resorted instead to what John Meklin (the Public Affairs Officer in the Saigon Embassy in 1962) later described as "excessive classification...that denied newsmen access to whole

¹⁶ Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, p. 198.

¹⁷ Wheeler as quoted in Memo, Hilsman to Harriman and Forrestal (2 Feb 1963), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, "Vietnam 2/1/63-3/21/63," #1.

¹⁸ William Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, Part 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986-1989), p. 111.

segments of US operations.”¹⁹ This pressure of public relations remained a key source of distortion in reporting and intelligence throughout 1962.

The general political rhetoric of Vietnam policy also had a distorting effect on Vietnam intelligence. The basic justification of the U.S. support for the GVN, as clarified in the White Paper of December 1961, was to defend the freedom of South Vietnam against communist aggression. At the same time, it was widely believed in 1962 that negotiated settlement for South Vietnam was not a viable option. Although John Galbraith, the U.S. Ambassador to India, advised the President to start negotiation with North Vietnam in April 1962, his idea was strongly opposed by the JCS, which argued “Any reversal of US policy could have disastrous effects, not only upon our relationship with South Vietnam, but with the rest of our Asian and other allies as well.”²⁰ After Galbraith’s proposal was secretly tested and failed,²¹ negotiation with the communists was kept out of policy option, leaving victory as the only way out of the RVN. Those policy frameworks increased the pressure on U.S. officials, including intelligence analysts, not to emphasise elements (such as the limited significance of communism in the NLF, the mistreatment of the people by the GVN, and the difficulty of winning the conflict against a highly experienced nationalist movement) that might put into question the basic assumptions behind Vietnam policy.

2. Too early to judge (December 1961 - May 1962)

Kennedy’s decision in December 1961 to step up the U.S. support for the GVN was followed by a large flow of U.S. money, materials and personnel into the RVN and the introduction of new projects aimed at containing the insurgency. During the course of 1962, the number of U.S. personnel in South Vietnam rose from around 3,000 to 11,500.²² In February 1962, the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) was absorbed into the new commando structure, the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). Under the expanded and reorganised U.S. mission, the Strategic Hamlet project became a focal point of the GVN/U.S. operations. According to the plan, the programme was to serve as a coordinated civil-military effort to “gain or maintain security and population control, and establish effective

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 112. See also: Memo, Mecklin to Nolting, “Press Relations” (27 Nov 1962), *FRUS, Vietnam 1961-1963*, vol. II, 322.

²⁰ Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War, Part 2*, pp. 120.

²¹ President Kennedy authorised Averell Harriman and William Sullivan, who were attending the Geneva conference on Laos, to meet North Vietnamese Foreign Minister Ung Van Khiem at the hotel suite of the Burmese delegation, but the meeting achieved virtually nothing. Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War, Part 2*, pp. 120–121.

²² Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War, Part 2*, pp. 137.

presence of government among people.”²³ Peasants were to be grouped into fortified villages (or “hamlets”). Within each hamlet, a Civic Action team was to offer basic socioeconomic support to the inhabitants. Paramilitary units, including Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps, were expected to provide defensive measures, while the police force was to maintain law and order. These civilian projects were to be supported by the military’s “clear and hold” operations (or “pacification”) designed to eliminate insurgents by force. Initially, the joint projects began as Operation Sunrise in the Binh Duong province in March 1962, and Operation Seas Swallow in the Phu Yen province in May 1962.²⁴

Alongside those interdepartmental efforts, each section of the U.S. mission had its own programmes. The Embassy, for example, was encouraging the Presidential Palace to introduce political reform that the U.S. government thought was necessary, such as the delegation of power to officers on the front line. The US Operation Mission (USOM) was assisting with socioeconomic projects and working with the South Vietnamese Ministry of the Interior to improve the quality of local administration.²⁵ The MACV was helping the reform and operations of the South Vietnamese army (ARVN), while the CIA’s Saigon Station (CAS) was conducting covert operations mainly in the Central Highlands.²⁶

Already in early 1962, some observers – including the British Embassy in Saigon and the unnamed author of a provocative article in *New Republic* in March 1962 – expressed their pessimism about the GVN’s ability to contain the insurgency.²⁷ Yet, negative comments on the prospects of the new programmes were limited during the first quarter of 1962. At this early stage, many officers in the U.S. mission apparently assumed that, as Lionel McGarr (the commander of

²³ Memo, MACV, “Special Report on Provincial Rehabilitation, 19–30 Aug. 1962” (8 Sept 1962), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 9, Folder 6.

²⁴ For the counterinsurgency in early 1962, see for example: Memo MACV, “Clearing and Holding Operations” (11 May 1962), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 8, “May 1962: 10–29”; INR, RFE-27 “Progress Report on South Vietnam” (18 June 1962), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, “Vietnam, 3/1/62–7/27/62”, #8; MACV, “Special Report on Provincial Rehabilitation, 19–30 Aug. 1962” (8 Sept 1962), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 9, Folder 6.

²⁵ Memo, Knox to Hilsman, “The Joint American-Vietnamese Program for the Training of Local Government Officials” (1 Feb 1962), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, “Vietnam, 1/62–2/62”, #2; Harvey Neese and John O’Donnell eds., *Prelude to Tragedy: Vietnam 1960–1965* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001).

²⁶ Thomas Ahern, *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2001).

²⁷ Peter Busch, *All the Way with JFK?: Britain, the US, and the Vietnam War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 118–121; Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, Part 2, pp. 120–121; Z, “The War in Vietnam: We Have Not Been Told the Whole Truth,” *New Republic* (12 March 1962); Memo, Jorden to Cotrell “New Republic article and editorial on Viet-Nam” (16 March 1962); INR, Hughes to Rice “Comments on ‘The War in Vietnam’ by ‘Z’, *New Republic*, 3.12.62” (n.d.), all three documents in JFKL, President’s Office Files, Country Files, Box 128A, “Vietnam, Security, 1962,” #7, 7a, and 7d.

MAAG) suggested, “our country’s strong stand announced to the world” was having a positive psychological effect on the friendly forces.²⁸ At the February 1962 Honolulu conference, Gen. Harkins emphasised “a spirit of optimism and growing confidence within Vietnamese and U.S. military and civilian circles,” promoting Ambassador Nolting to add that a “spirits of movement is discernable.”²⁹ At the same time, reports and intelligence had not yet provided a clear picture of the scale of the problems facing the GVN. The MACV’s Order of Battle statistics, according to George Allen (a MACV analyst in 1962), continued to underestimate the number of the insurgents and the extent of enemy-controlled territory, due partly to the deliberate distortion of intelligence by Col. James Winterbottom (the head of the MACV intelligence section, J-2) and Gen. Paul Harkins (the MACV commander).³⁰ Another source of feedback to senior policymakers – the weekly “Status Reports” to the NSC – listed the progress in the GVN/US projects rather than the weaknesses of the GVN or the strength of the NLF.³¹ Although the GVN’s problems (including the lack of popular support for President Diem) were mentioned in cables and reports, they were mostly seen as factors that could be mitigated by new projects or that would not jeopardise the prospect of victory.³² Moreover, the future of those new programmes, which were still at the stage of planning and partial implementation, remained highly uncertain.

²⁸ Letter, McGarr to Lyndon Johnson (22 Feb 1962), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 7, “February 1962: 19-23.”

²⁹ Minutes of the 3rd Honolulu conference on Vietnam (19 Feb 1962), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 7, “February 1962: 19-23.”

³⁰ According to George Allen (MACV intelligence analyst in 1962) and John Newman, the number of VC guerrillas in the first MACV Order of Battle estimates in April was reduced from over 40,000 to 16,305 under pressure from Winterbottom. The first graphic battlefield assessment presented at the Honolulu conference in May was also edited by Winterbottom and Harkins, who converted about one-third of “enemy controlled” areas into either “neutral” or “government controlled” and replaced around half of the “neutral” areas with “government controlled.” Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, pp. 242–244, 249; Allen, *None So Blind*, p. 142.

³¹ For the Status Reports in late 1961 to early 1962, see: documents in JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 202, “Vietnam, Subjects, Status Reports, 6/12/61–11/10/61,”; Memo, State Department Task Force Viet-Nam, “Status Report on the Instructions to Ambassador Nolting” (21 Feb 1962); Memo, JCS J-3, “Status Report of the Military Actions in South Vietnam” (21 Feb 1963); Memo, CIA, “Status Report on Covert Actions in Vietnam” (23 Feb 1963) all in JFKL, President’s Office Files, Country Files, Box 128A, “Vietnam, Security, 1962,” #3, #10 and #11; Stat Dept. Task Force Viet-Nam, “Status Report on the Instruction to Ambassador Nolting” (18 April 1962), JFKL, John Newman Papers, Box 8, “April 1962: 10–28.”

³² See for example: Memo, Knox (USOM) to Hilsman, “The Joint American-Vietnamese Program for the Training of Local Government Officials” (1 Feb 1962), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, “Vietnam, 1/62–2/62,” #2; Minutes of the 3rd Honolulu conference on Vietnam (19 Feb 1962), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 7, “February 1962: 19-23.”

3. Warning and pessimism (June - July 1962)

In June to early August 1962, some of the key problems for the GVN became much clearer. While many documents continued to stress achievements,³³ problems were also mentioned and/or analysed in cables from Saigon, reports by returned officers, briefings to senior policymakers, and in-depth analysis in Washington. Policymakers tended to be sceptical about negative reports coming from those outside the administration, such as U.S. journalists and the French government. Yet some documents – notably William Pfaff’s five-page letter to John Cogley dated 1 July³⁴ – and some issues mentioned in the media were taken seriously.

In July, problems in the Strategic Hamlet programme became a major concern for the CIA Saigon Station and the INR, even though Ambassador Nolting and the CIA’s Office of Current Intelligence remained more optimistic about its future.³⁵ The CAS cable on 3 July in particular warned that the entire programme was being “sabotaged by military field commanders and, most dangerously, by the province chiefs.” Field commanders did not want to use their force in static defence, while province chiefs ignored the requests that the trainees at the Strategic Hamlet Training Center be selected from individuals who were “in good standing in their communities and having enough prestige to influence the people.” As it turned out, according to the cable, many of the trainees at the Thi Nghe Strategic Hamlet Training Center came from “the lowest elements possible,” including “illiterate peasants...juvenile delinquents, and others who constituted a control problem.” The cable also pointed out that “the harsh, dictatorial approach by the Provincial Chiefs” was “turning the peasant more and more against the government” and that there was “extensive corruption in the use of funds and supplies” given to the Provincial Chiefs for setting up the hamlets.³⁶ This was followed by another CAS cable on 16 July, which analysed the potential risk of

³³ See for example: INR, RFE-27, “Progress Report on South Vietnam” (18 June 1962), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, “Vietnam, 3/1/62–7/27/62,” #8; Task Force Viet-Nam, “Final Report” (1 July 1962), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 8, “July 1962: 1–5.”

³⁴ This five-page letter was written after Pfaff’s intensive survey of South Vietnam during June 1962. It was passed on to Forrestal (and probably to senior officers in the State Department) via Ralph Dungan. On 3 August, Forrestal wrote to Dungan that Pfaff’s letter was “extremely interesting” and “certainly does confirm with [sic] suspicions which I have been developing myself from the information available here.” Letter, Pfaff to Cogley (1 July 1962); Letter, Forrestal to Dungan (3 Aug 1962), both documents in JFKL, White House Central Files, Subject Files, Box 75, “CO312 Viet-Nam, 4/16/62–12/31/62.”

³⁵ Cable, Saigon to State (20 July 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, “Vietnam General, 7/20/62–7/30/62”, #1; CIA/OCI, “Strategic Hamlet and Counterinsurgency” (3 Aug 1962) as quoted in Anthony Lewis, “Re-examining Our Perceptions on Vietnam,” p. 44.

³⁶ Cable, CAS to CIA, “[deleted] the Strategic Hamlet Program” (3 July 1962), the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room, <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 2 Sept 2007.

expanding the project. The expansion was planned by the Presidential Palace, which came to regard the Strategic Hamlet programme as a “generalized national rallying symbol” and as a “militant democracy in underdeveloped countries.” The cable argued that the ambitious plan of Ngo Dinh Nhu, the President’s younger brother, to stretch the programme into enemy-controlled territories (including the use of “kibbutz-type posts to which young, highly motivated families would be sent to live...in areas adjacent to VC strongholds”) was “perhaps the most debatable feature of current GVN plans.” The cable warned that the insufficient integration of the project into a wider security plan would make hamlets vulnerable to enemy attacks, which were likely to intensify after the end of the rainy season.³⁷ When forwarding this cable to Roger Hilsman (the chairman of the INR), Charles Spinks (an INR analyst) generally agreed with the CAS’s assessment, but added future warnings. He argued, for example, that the disagreement between Nhu and his brother Can, who controlled the central part of the RVN, would not be solved as easily as the CAS predicted.³⁸

On the military side of operations, reports drew attention to at least two key problems in the South Vietnamese military (the ARVN). The first was the Palace’s political interference in military affairs, much of which stemmed from its desire to reduce the risk of a military coup. (After the large-scale coup attempt in November 1960 and the bombing of the Presidential Palace by two Air Force aircrafts in November 1961, a coup d’état was hardly a distant possibility in 1962.) In an attempt to avoid the concentration of power and thereby prevent the rise of a leader who could oppose his power, the President kept the command structure “so split and confused that military operations against the communist Viet Cong guerrillas border on chaotic,” according to Ben Price (AP).³⁹ Some aspects of operations, such as the number of bombs that each airplane could carry, were subject to restrictions so as not to enable officers to use their forces against the Presidential Palace.⁴⁰ On top of this, Diem’s insistence on making all tactical decisions was

³⁷ Cable, CAS to CIA, “Analysis of the Strategic Hamlets Program and of the Montagnard Situation in South Vietnam” (16 July 1962), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, “Vietnam, 3/1/62–7/27/62,” #11a.

³⁸ Memo, INR, “CAS Evaluation of Strategic Hamlet Program in South Vietnam” (17 July 1962), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, “Vietnam, 3/1/62–7/27/62,” #11. In August 1962, an equally critical report was published by RAND / the Advance Research Project Agency (“The Vietnamese ‘Strategic Hamlet’: A Preliminary Report”). Lewis, “Re-examining Our Perceptions on Vietnam,” p. 45.

³⁹ Price’s article as reported in Cable, CINCPAC to MACV (9 July 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A “Vietnam General, 7/7/62–7/10/62,” #11.

⁴⁰ A returned officer reported that military equipments that the US gave to the GVN was “not getting past the warehouses in Saigon, mainly because the government is afraid that a coup will be started against them if certain military units receive all the equipment they should have”. According to another report, after the bombing of the Presidential Palace by South Vietnamese Air Force personnel in February 1962, Diem allowed aircraft to carry

making operations slow and inflexible,⁴¹ while his intolerance to casualties on his side made commanders reluctant to engage in a risky but important operation.⁴² The second problem lay in the morale, competence and loyalty of soldiers. The CIA Saigon Station, for example, reported in June that the South Vietnamese people, including soldiers, were “getting tired of the present situation,” and suggested the possibility of a coup attempt.⁴³ One of the junior officers who participated in counterinsurgency orientation visit to South Vietnam during June and July 1962 also observed:

Fire discipline is extremely poor. A large percentage of the troops won't shoot back and the ones that will couldn't hit an elephant...The attitude of the Army is pervaded by apathy. They just don't seem to possess the will to win...The provincial Army...had the additional problems of being highly infiltrated by VC. In the briefing given by MACV, it was stated that from 10% to 30 % of the Provincial Army was in sympathy with the Viet Cong...I was told by pilots from HMM-362 of the instance, when carrying Provincial troops, upon their disembarking from the helicopters they turned and fired on the aircraft.⁴⁴

small bombs only (typically around 20 pounds). When one aircraft was permitted to carry a 1000-pound bomb, Diem made sure that it did not have enough fuel to reach Saigon. In June 1963, the MACV also recognised the restriction on the amount of bombs as a major problem. A set of reports by officers who participated orientation visit to South Vietnam (c. Aug 1962), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 10, “Dec. 1962: 7–31.” Memo, Timmes to Harkins, “VNAF Bomb Moratorium” (15 June 1963), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 12, “June. 1963: 10–16.”

⁴¹ Discussing an assault on a small village on 22 June, an officer argued that the major reason for its failure was that “the intelligence had to go up the chain of command all the way to the president. Then with the president picking the units and the tactics to be used, the information reached the tactical units some nine hours later.” The VC had departed the village five hours earlier. Another officer made a similar point that “all directions on any military operations must be approved by Diem, no matter how small the operations, and once the plan is approved it can only be changed by Diem,” and provided a pre-planned assault against insurgents on 26 July as a typical example: “The landing zone and the direction of attack for the troops was already set. When we arrived at the landing zone, the Viet Cong (a regular VC Company, numbering approximately 100 to 150) was plainly visible about one half a mile past the landing zone, away from the direction of attack. Neither the landing zone nor the direction of attack could be changed. They all escaped.” A set of reports by officers who participated orientation visit to South Vietnam (c. Aug 1962), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 10, “Dec. 1962: 7–31.”

⁴² “[Local] military commanders do not take chances,” Pfaff observed, “Why fight aggressively and risk defeat when it is possible to hide in forts and be congratulated by the government for low casualty rates. Letter, Pfaff to Cogley (1 July 1962), JFKL, White House Central Files, Subject Files, Box 75, “CO312 Viet-Nam, 4/16/62–12/31/62.” Ben Price also reported on 8 July that Major General William Rosson (Chief of the US Special Forces (Guerrillas)) was offended by the ARVN's commander's “refusal to take the offensive in any meaningful way,” even though that story was categorically denied by the US Army and Rosson himself. Cable, CINCPAC to MACV (9 July 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A “Vietnam General, 7/7/62–7/10/62,” #11.

⁴³ Cable, CAS to CIA, “Possibility of a Coup D'etat” (15 June 1962), the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 2 Sept 2006.

⁴⁴ A set of reports by officers who participated orientation visit to South Vietnam (c. Aug 1962), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 10, “Dec. 1962: 7–31.”

Knowledge about other aspects of enemy activities remained quite limited in mid-1962. Just how little the U.S. intelligence community knew about the NLF in 1962 was revealed in the National Intelligence Estimates 53-63 (April 1963), which identified the NLF as the political wing of the Viet Cong (the term used by the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments to describe their enemy) and argued that “this organization [the NLF] currently has little following in Vietnam, is clearly a front for the Communists, and its ostensible leaders are political nonentities.”⁴⁵ A notable exception was enemy infiltration from Laos and Cambodia, which became a major issue when Robert Trumbull (*New York Times*) and Neil Sheeham (UPI) reported on 4 and 13 July that thousands of North Vietnamese cadres had been “streaming like water through a sieve across the border from Laos into South Vietnam.”⁴⁶ Although the U.S. government dismissed those reports as mere speculation,⁴⁷ it accepted that there had been an increase in infiltration since May 1962. (MACV figures for infiltration were 500–1000 per month from June 1961 to November 1961, 100–200 per month from December 1961 to April 1962, 800–1000 in May 1962, and 800 in the first week of June 1962.⁴⁸) It was also widely recognized that the DRV could step up infiltration “with no great difficulty and relatively little danger of detection,” as insurgents dominated the inhabitants in much of the border area and South Vietnamese patrolling along the Laotian frontier was limited.⁴⁹

Arguably the most serious problem for the GVN recognised in mid-1962 was the lack of active support by the rural community. On 12 June, the CIA reported that limited public opinion sampling in Phong Dinh Province southwest of Saigon confirmed previous reporting that “the peasant, for the most part, is hostile or has

⁴⁵ NIE 53-63 “Prospects in South Vietnam” (17 Apr 1963), p. 5, the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 2 July 2006. For actual political activities of the Viet Cong, see Truong Nhu Tang, *A Viet Cong Memoir*.

⁴⁶ INR, RFE-30, “Reports on Increased Communist Infiltration into South Vietnam from Laos” (16 July 1962), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, “Vietnam, 3/1/62–7/27/62,” #10.

⁴⁷ Cable, MACV to CINCPAC, “News Release of DRV Movement from Laos into South Vietnam” (5 July 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, “Vietnam, General, 7/1/62–7/6/62,” #15e; Cable, CINCPAC to JCS, “New Releases of DRV Movement from Laos to South Vietnam” (5 July 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, “Vietnam, General, 7/1/62–7/6/62,” #15c; Memo, CIA to White House, (5 July 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, “Vietnam, General, 7/1/62–7/6/62,” #16A; INR, RFE-30 “Reports on Increased Communist Infiltration into South Vietnam from Laos” (16 July 1962), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, “Vietnam, 3/1/62–7/27/62,” #10.

⁴⁸ INR, RFE-30 “Reports on Increased Communist Infiltration into South Vietnam from Laos” (16 July 1962), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, “Vietnam, 3/1/62–7/27/62,” #10. For slightly different figures, see: Memo, CIA to White House, (5 July 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, “Vietnam, General, 7/1/62–7/6/62,” #16A.

⁴⁹ INR, RFE-30 “Reports on Increased Communist Infiltration into South Vietnam from Laos” (16 July 1962), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, “Vietnam, 3/1/62–7/27/62,” #10; Cable, MACV (14 Aug 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, “Vietnam, General, 8/1/62–8/14/62,” #22.

adopted a 'wait-and-see' attitude toward the regime. Reasons were: injustice of GVN officials, shelling of village by GVN forces, inadequacy of GVN aid to villages."⁵⁰ This was followed by the INR's research paper of 18 June, which concluded that "Despite favorable developments, there has been no major break-through in improving the popular image of the government particularly in the countryside," pointing out that the ultimate challenge of political reform was to "walk the thin line of meaningful and sustained assistance to the villagers without obvious efforts to direct, regiment, or control them."⁵¹ Likewise, the Vietnam Task Force's Final Report on 1 July warned that "Our attempt continues, but Diem's popular support has decreased."⁵² On the same day, journalist William Pfaff wrote down his observation:

The villagers have...no special reason to love this government...The government insists on collecting land rent on even the smallest properties...the peasant tips off the VC, there is an ambush, and the former saves his rent, the VC adds to its collection of weapons...the peasant's relationship to the army is that of any peasant to any army – he hates and fears it because it disrupts his life and livelihood.⁵³

A week later, Ben Price (AP) reported that, according to returned officers he interviewed, forced resettlements without proper explanation to peasants were "creating a vast reservoir of resentment."⁵⁴ Toward the end of July, those warnings culminated in a 78-page study of peasant-government relations by the State Department's Policy Planning Council ("South Vietnam: The Political Relationship between the Central Government and the Countryside"). After outlining the historical background, the study examined the following factors as major sources of peasant apathy and hostility toward the government:

- a. the ineffectiveness of the GVN in providing security and in administering the welfare programs;

⁵⁰ Memo, CIA, "Covert Annex to Status Report of Task Force Vietnam" (12 June 1962), the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 3 June 2006.

⁵¹ INR, RFE-27, "Progress Report on South Vietnam" (18 June 1962), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, "Vietnam, 3/1/62–7/27/62," #8.

⁵² Memo, Task Force Viet-Nam, "Final Report" (1 July 1962), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 8, "July 1962: 1–5."

⁵³ Letter, Pfaff to Cogley (1 July 1962), JFKL, White House Central Files, Subject Files, Box 75, "CO312 Viet-Nam, 4/16/62–12/31/62." About a year later (August 1963), Brigadier General Tra Tu Oai (Chief of the Department of Psychological Warfare, ARVN) told the CAS that in order to rally the population to support the GVN, the government had to remove and punish province chiefs, district chiefs and other officials who oppressed the people. He observed that district chiefs in particular were prone to collect 'special taxes' and then keep the money." Cable, CAS to CIA, "Analysis of the Buddhist Crisis by General Oai" (16 Aug 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, "Vietnam, General, 8/1/63–8/20/63," #48.

⁵⁴ Price's article as reported in Cable, CINCPAC to MACV (9 July 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A "Vietnam General, 7/7/62–7/10/62," #11.

- b. excessive demands upon the rural population;
- c. lack of empathy on the part of local officials and their frequent failure to explain government programs adequately;
- d. lack of justice in the treatment of accused individuals;
- e. lack of trust by the people in the GVN leadership because of differences in style of living, regional origins and religion, allegations of venality, exploitative activities of the Can Lao Party, etc.; and
- f. such possible economic grievances as failure to implement land reform fully.

The report suggested that, in order to rally the support of the rural population, a “general demarche” in political reform was necessary.⁵⁵

Facing those reports, many, including senior policymakers, recognised the possibility of rapid deterioration of the situation in the RVN and/or the need to consider a negotiated settlement. William Pfaff’s letter on 1 July concluded, “There simply is no military solution possible here...There has got to be a political solution. But as things stand now the parallels with [the last years of the first Indochina War] are painful.”⁵⁶ In late July, R. A. Burrows (the counsellor of the British Embassy in Saigon) argued that there could be no hope of progress under President Diem, while Colonel Henry Lee (a military attaché to the British Embassy) mentioned the possibility of replacing the President by a military junta. On 2 August, H. A. F. Hohler (British Ambassador to South Vietnam) reportedly told a Vietnamese journalist that the only solution for South Vietnam was a neutralist coalition, pointing out that the U.S. government had little experience in counterinsurgency.⁵⁷ The next day (3 August), Ambassador Nolting reported that the “next 6–12 months will be period of crisis in [the] sense that either great improvement in situation or considerable deterioration could ensue,” adding that the GVN’s programmes, which had raised hope, could “boomerang disastrously [sic] if not followed through.”⁵⁸ Three days later Forrestal suggested that the U.S.

⁵⁵ Memo, State Department, Policy Planning Council, “South Vietnam: The Political Relationship Between the Central Government and the Countryside (Draft)” (27 July 1962), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 23, “Southeast Asia, 1961–1966, Vietnam: South Vietnam: Political Relationship Between the Central Government and the Countryside 7/27/62.” See also: Memo, Bagley to Taylor, “State Policy Planning Council Paper on Political Actions in South Viet-Nam” (24 July 1962), *FRUS*, Vietnam, 1961–1963, vol. II, 249.

⁵⁶ Letter, Pfaff to Cogley (1 July 1962), JFKL, White House Central Files, Subject Files, Box 75, “CO312 Viet-Nam, 4/16/62–12/31/62.”

⁵⁷ Nolting responded to the news by saying that when he met Hohler on 8 August, the latter expressed optimism. Nolting also added that report of this sort should be treated “with great reserve and with the possibility in mind that it may represent a deliberate attempt to create mistrust between the United States and Great Britain.” CIA Saigon to CIA, “Views of British Ambassador to South Vietnam to South Vietnam, H. A. F. Hohler, on a Neutralist Solution for South Vietnam” (14 Aug 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, “Vietnam, General, 8/1/62–8/14/62”, #18. For the scepticism of the British Embassy in early to mid-1962, see: Peter Busch, *All the Way with JFK?*, pp. 118–121.

⁵⁸ Memo, Saigon to State, “Outline FY 63 Aid Program, Interim Fund Request” (3 Aug

might have to withdraw from the RVN, writing to Keisen: “I want to get out there, armed with some of Averell’s bite, to see what can be done. I don’t think we have much time to decide whether to stay with SVN on our terms or get out.”⁵⁹

4. Diverting attention (August 1962)

At least three developments around August 1962 helped marginalise those weaknesses of the GVN reported during the early summer of 1962, paving the way for the spread of a positive assessment in late 1962. The first is the authorisations to expand air campaigns and the Strategic Hamlet programme. At this point, the Pentagon was not fully aware of negative aspects of this policy, including the greater risk of civilian casualties caused by large-scale, poorly targeted offensives.⁶⁰ Nor did it take seriously the possibility that one of the main reasons why the GVN wanted the regular troops to rely on long-range artillery and air strikes (while ordering paramilitary units to defend the most vulnerable posts) was to avoid close contact between insurgents and the regular troops and thereby to reduce the casualties to the latter, which President Diem might see as protection for his own power.⁶¹ Likewise, when on 6 August the GVN informed the U.S. mission of its plan to expand the Strategic Hamlet programmes into less secure territories, rather than adhering to the “oil bolt” principle of extending the project carefully from secure areas,⁶² the U.S. government largely accepted it without serious scrutiny of its implications. In his cable to Washington on 9 August, William Trueheart (U.S. Embassy) judged that “the development of this plan constitutes a most welcome step forward in the GVN’s effort to organize the Strategic Hamlet Program in a more effective manner.”⁶³ In a similar tone, General Lemnitzer (the Chairman of the JCS) told McNamara on 28 August that “the plan reflects sincere interest and a desire to pursue the task with both organization and coordination.”⁶⁴

1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, “Vietnam General, 8/1/62–8/14/62,” #5.

⁵⁹ Memo, Forrestal (6 Aug 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, “Vietnam General, 8/1/62–8/14/62,” #8. On 3 August, however, Forrestal stressed uncertainty, arguing that “no one is sure yet whether we are winning or losing.” Letter, Forrestal to Dungan (3 Aug 1962), JFKL, White House Central Files, Subject Files, Box 75, “CO312 Viet-Nam, 4/16/62–12/31/62.”

⁶⁰ Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, pp. 286–288.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

⁶² Memo, GVN Inter-ministerial Committee for Strategic Hamlet, “Proposal Priority Order for Plan of Strategic Hamlets’ Construction” (6 Aug 1962), NA, RG330, OASD/ISA, Secret and Below General Files, 1962, Box 109, “Vietnam, 1962, 400.3295–471.6.”

⁶³ Cable, Saigon to State, “Strategic Hamlet Priority Program” (9 Aug 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, “Vietnam, General, 8/1/62–8/14/62, #11.”

⁶⁴ Memo, Lemnitzer to McNamara, “GVN Strategic Hamlets Priority Program” (28 Aug 1962) NA, RG330, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (OASD/ISA), Secret and Below General Files, 1962, Box 109, “Vietnam, 1962,

It appeared that the CIA station, which warned against such expansion in the cable on 16 July mentioned earlier, did not oppose the plan either, possibly because its chief since 1959, William Colby, was replaced by John Richardson in mid-1962.⁶⁵

The second factor that mitigated the pessimism of the early summer of 1962 was the GVN's emphasis on the VC hardships in some areas particularly in the central part of the RVN. In August, Nguyen Dinh Thuan (the Secretary of State) provided the MACV with evidence (including captured VC letters) that indicated a severe shortage of food and medical supplies for insurgents in the Central Highlands.⁶⁶ Exploiting this information to underline the benefit of using herbicide, which the White House remained reluctant to authorise,⁶⁷ Thuan argued, "VC crops destruction by all means will cut down infiltration rate and force communists for showdown in the plain, in which our forces could use...their superior means."⁶⁸ Nolting relayed this news to the State Department on 25 August, arguing:

Both Embassy and MACV consider as encouraging those indications of VC hardships in highland areas...MACV report...records first real indication [that] health conditions of VC may be sufficiently serious to affect operational effectiveness...All these indications reinforce our conviction that carefully conceived crop destruction programs in clearly VC areas...can be important weapon against VC. These operations must be mounted quickly if to be effective.⁶⁹

On the same day, Hilsman told Harriman that, according to reports from Saigon, "the Viet Cong in at least certain areas are extremely short of medical supplies and suffering unusually high sickness rate."⁷⁰ Those reports, though not unfounded, drew attention to the problems, rather than strengths, of the enemy forces.

400.3295-471.6." See also: Memo, W Bundy to the Chairman of the JCS, "Funding of Strategic Hamlet Kits, Vietnam" (21 Aug 1962), NA, RG330, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (OASD/ISA), Secret and Below General Files, 1962, Box 109, "Vietnam, 1962, 111-121."

⁶⁵ Memo, CIA, "Interesting Items from Recent Chiefs of Stations Monthly [deleted] Letters" (21 Aug 1962), NA, CREST 80M01048A001500100068-3.

⁶⁶ In fact, the shortage of medical supplies for the Viet Cong had already been reported in July. Memo, JCS, "Southeast Asia Situation Report, No. 28-62" (11 July 1962), JFKL, NSF, Regional Security, Box 231A, "Southeast Asia, General, 1/62-12/62," #8a. For similar reports in November 1962, see: Cable, Saigon to State (21 Nov 1962), *FRUS*, Vietnam 1961-1963, vol. II, 321.

⁶⁷ Memo, State to M. Bundy, "Suggested Topics for Discussion with Thuan" (22 Sept 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, "Vietnam, General, 9/22/62-9/29/62," #5.

⁶⁸ Cable, Saigon to State (30 Aug 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, "Vietnam General, 8/23/62-8/31/62," #23.

⁶⁹ Cable, Saigon to State (25 Aug 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, "Vietnam General, 8/23/62-8/31/62," #10. The INR did not rigorously investigate the authenticity and significance of the report either: Memo, INR, "Medical Treatment for Viet Cong POWs" (25 Aug 1962), NA, RG 59, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, the Vietnam Working Group, Subject Files, 1963-1966, Box 3, "POL 29 Amnesty 1962."

⁷⁰ Memo, Hilsman to Harriman, "Medical Treatment for Viet Cong POWs" (25 Aug 1962), NA, RG 59, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, the Vietnam Working Group, Subject Files,

The third, and related, source of optimism was the GVN's efforts to exaggerate its achievements and conceal negative information. While such attempts did exist before,⁷¹ they became bolder and more effective during the second half of 1962. A possible trigger for this development was the meeting between Ambassador Nolting and Secretary Thuan on 15 August. In this meeting, they discussed the possibility of war-weariness among the friendly forces,⁷² and the GVN's suspicion about declining U.S. confidence in the counterinsurgency, which the GVN feared could lead Washington to consider a reduction of its support or even a neutralist solution. Sharing the GVN's anxiety, Nolting told Thuan that "we may be approaching time when a definite shift in GVN psychological line should be made," and continued:

Perhaps GVN should begin to point to light at end of tunnel, which may be not far away. This line can be made credible and I suggested that he and President Diem should think seriously about fixing eyes of South Vietnamese people on achievement of peace and fruits thereof within relatively near future. Thuan agreed that President Diem should move in this direction and that we should work together to inject this note of hope into his public speeches.⁷³

Just two days later (17 August), at the end of an address to province and military officers, the President's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, declared that "in another year current unconventional war in SVN would be won and then a conventional war would be launched northward with the ultimate objective of the unification of Vietnam."⁷⁴ Shortly afterward (late August), the Palace expelled François Sully

1963–1966, Box 3, "POL 29 Amnesty 1962."

⁷¹ There had been a suspicion that the GVN were distorting information in an attempt to influence the US policy. For example, the INR pointed out in June 1962 that the GVN tabulated almost 800 strategic villages in December 1961 and about 1,300 in April 1962, while the US Embassy estimated that there were only 150–200 such settlements in February 1962. On the U.S. side, the MACV instructed its officers in June 1962 to avoid "overly frank and critical discussion" on GVN policies with their Vietnamese counterparts, whereas at around the same time Ambassador Nolting reportedly made clear that "anybody not prepared to 'win with Diem' will get thrown out." The reason for this was that "all United State military personnel are looked upon as spokesmen for the United States by Vietnamese citizens and their every statement emphasized." INR, RFE-27 "Progress Report on South Vietnam" (18 June 1962), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, "Vietnam, 3/1/62–7/27/62," #8; Memo, MACV, "Discussions and Statements by US Personnel" (27 June 1962), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 8, "June 1962: 20–30"; Letter, Pfaff to Cogley (1 July 1962), Letter Forrestal to Dungan (3 Aug 1962), both documents in JFKL, White House Central Files, Subject Files, Box 75, "CO312 Viet-Nam, 4/16/62–12/31/62."

⁷² For long, Nolting was concerned about the possibility that the lack of spectacular success made it difficult for Diem to sustain public morale and support for his regime. See for example: Cable, Saigon to State, "Status Report on Political Items as of Nov. 23" (24 Nov 1961), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 6, "Nov 1961: 22–24."

⁷³ Cable, Saigon to State (16 Aug 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, "Vietnam General, 8/15/62–8/22/62," #4.

⁷⁴ Cable, Saigon to State (18 Aug 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, "Vietnam, General, 8/15/62–8/22/62," #7.

(*Newsweek*) from the country after his critical article of 20 August, followed by the same action against James Robinson (NBC) in October.⁷⁵ Meanwhile, the GVN imposed restrictions on U.S. reporters who remained in the RVN, including a prohibition on journalists covering operations in Zone D and a ban on field unit commanders talking with correspondents other than through written communications.⁷⁶ Pointing out that the actions against Sully and Robinson signalled a major shift in GVN press policy, John Mecklin (the Public Affairs Officer at the Saigon Embassy) warned Nolting on 27 November that “this policy is being formulated and administered by Counselor Nhu, uncomfortably often at the whim of his wife...the GVN is deliberately harassing all foreign newsmen, and, even more seriously, deliberately attempting to establish a blackout on news from Vietnam other than official communiques, which are notoriously unreliable.”⁷⁷

5. Spread of optimism (September - December 1962)

Bad news continued to reach Washington throughout the summer and autumn of 1962. In September, for example, the U.S. mission reported the opposition in Khanh Hoa province,⁷⁸ and some documents continued to mention problems in the government-peasant relations.⁷⁹ The sudden deterioration of South Vietnamese diplomatic relations with Laos and Cambodia was one of the key subjects at the meeting between President Kennedy and State Secretary Thuan on 25 September.⁸⁰ The biggest concern around September 1962, though, was the expansion of enemy activities and infiltration. On 23 August, the CIA Saigon Station reported that insurgents were extending their operations into the Saigon area, which remained relatively safe at that time.⁸¹ At the Tuesday luncheon on 11 September, according

⁷⁵ Cable, Saigon to State (6 Sept 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, “Vietnam, General, 9/1/62–9/14/62,” #3; Cable, Saigon to State (29 Oct 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 197, “Vietnam, General, 10/18/62–10/31/62,” #18.

⁷⁶ Memo, Mecklin to Nolting, “Press Relations” (27 Nov 1962), *FRUS*, Vietnam 1961-1963, vol. II, 322.

⁷⁷ Memo, Mecklin to Nolting, “Press Relations” (27 Nov 1962), *FRUS*, Vietnam 1961-1963, vol. II, 322.

⁷⁸ Cable, CAS to CIA, “Opposition in Khanh Hoa Province to Arming Mountain Tribesmen and to the Strategic Hamlet Program” (13 Sept 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, “Vietnam, General, 9/1/62–9/14/62,” #16.

⁷⁹ Memo, [possibly CIA], “Program to Sample Peasant Attitudes and Opinion,” (n.d., probably early Sept 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, “Vietnam, General, 9/1/62–9/14/62,” #10a.

⁸⁰ Cable, State to Saigon, re. the conversation between Kennedy and Thuan on 25 Sept 1962 (27 Sept 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, Vietnam, General, 9/22/62–9/29/62, #24.

⁸¹ “During the later half of June 1962 more than five hundred unarmed Vietnamese Communist (VC) entered the Saigon area...The VC district committee...sent an armed platoon to the city to operate as special operation cells...A VC cadre...was sent to Saigon to set up a base among laborers to be used for future operations...Forty VC guerrilla between

to Roger Hilsman (the head of the INR), Forrestal discovered that the Bundy brothers and Walt Rostow were “all talking as if there had been a marked increase of infiltration into South Vietnam through Laos,” and requested the INR to produce another paper on the subject.⁸²

Despite all this, optimism gradually spread in the U.S. mission and among senior policymakers in Washington. On 21 August, the CIA station reported that “With acceleration and augmentation of the CIDG [Citizens’ Irregular Defense Groups] programs and continued steady progress on the Strategic Hamlets programs, the nature of war in South Vietnam could change significantly in our favor within eighteen months. Ambassador Nolting and the rest of us believe that the beginning of a change for the better is already evident.”⁸³ In a similarly positive tone, Dean Rusk (the Secretary of State) told Nolting on 23 August, commenting on Nhu’s speech on 17 August mentioned earlier, that “Diem’s calls for struggle and sacrifice could now be balanced with some description of purpose [of] this struggle in terms of what peace will eventually bring to Viet-Nam. If VC can be given bloody nose during coming dry season, light at end of tunnel would truly seem brighter.”⁸⁴ When Forrestal briefed the President on 18 September on Nolting’s latest “somewhat bullish” review of the situation, he emphasised “a 2-to-1 ratio in over-all casualties and almost a 4-to-1 ratio in the number of troops killed in action in favor of the GVN,” which, if sustained, “will inevitably have an important adverse psychological effect on the enemy.”⁸⁵ These statistics prompted Forrestal to argue that “While we cannot yet sit back in the confidence that the job

14 and 16 years of age had come to Saigon to conduct sabotage and kidnappings of government of Vietnam and US personnel.” Cable, CAS to CIA, “VC activities in the Saigon Area” (23 Aug 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, “Vietnam, General, 8/23/62–8/31/62,” #2.

⁸² Memo, Hilsman to Whiting, (12 Sept 1962), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 9, “Sept. 1962: 1–14.” In response, Hilsman asked Allen Whiting (the head of the INR’s Far East division) to initiate the production of a new study on the subject. The result might have been the INR’s Research Memorandum RFE-49 “Evidence of Recent Communist Infiltration South Vietnam from Laos” (19 Oct 1962), which concluded that “there is as yet no reliable evidence that this increase [in May and June] persisted during July and August, although it is possible that the infiltration rate rose in September.” INR, RFE-49, “Evidence of Recent Communist Infiltration into South Vietnam from Laos” (Oct 1962), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 9, “Oct. 1962: 16–31.” See also “Talking Paper: Communist Infiltration into South Vietnam From Laos” (28 Sept 1962), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 9, “Sept. 1962: 18–28.”

⁸³ Memo, CIA, “Interesting Items from Recent Chiefs of Stations Monthly [deleted] Letters” (21 Aug 1962), NA, CREST 80M01048A001500100068-3.

⁸⁴ Cable, State to Saigon (23 Aug 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, “Vietnam General, 8/23/62–8/31/62,” #4.

⁸⁵ Memo, Forrestal to JFK, “Situation in South Vietnam” (18 Sept 1962), JFKL, NSF, Box 196A, “Vietnam General, 9/15/62–9/21/62,” #7. See also: Memo, State to Kennedy, “Developments in Viet-Nam Between Gen. Taylor’s visits – October 1961 – October 1962” (8 Oct 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 197, “Vietnam, General, 10/7/62–10/17/62,” #2a; Memo, “Weekly Progress Report from Saigon,” JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 197, “Vietnam, General, 10/18/62–10/31/62,” #12.

is well in hand, nevertheless it does appear that we have finally developed a series of techniques which, if properly applied, do seem to produce results.” The positive trend in military statistics also led Robert McNamara (the Secretary of Defense) to declare at the Honolulu conference in October that “Every quantitative measure we have show that we are winning this war.”⁸⁶

Those positive assessments in late 1962 were not groundless. The expansion of the Strategic Hamlets and the aggressive use of air power did cause some difficulties to insurgents in some areas during the second half of 1962.⁸⁷ Nonetheless, the general optimism in late 1962 was misguided and detrimental in the long run, as it was to become clearer in 1963. It was based largely on the statistics of two projects: the Strategic Hamlet and large-scale military operations. Those statistics could be easily exaggerated either by reporting inaccurate figures or by counting elements that did not represent any substantial progress (such as a fake military sortie without serious contact with enemies, and strategic hamlets which had only a token wire around them).⁸⁸ Nor did the statistics show the negative effects of those operations (such as civilian casualties caused by poorly targeted air campaigns and the diversion of resources from other projects⁸⁹) or the remaining problems in other dimensions of counterinsurgency (such as the limited progress in civic action, the strength of insurgents, the oppressive practices of local officers and the lack of peasant support for the GVN).

Already in late 1962, some in the U.S. government noticed those problems. On 12 October, for example, Averell Harriman (the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs) cabled Nolting that “I remain concerned about the dangers of over-optimism...Although the tide may be turning in Viet-Nam, there is a danger that certain very serious problems may not be receiving the attention and action

⁸⁶ McNamara as quoted in Arthur Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 549.

⁸⁷ For positive developments in late 1962, see: Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Chapter 7.

⁸⁸ For the unreliability of the statistic on the number of strategic hamlets, see for example: INR, RFE-27 “Progress Report on South Vietnam” (18 June 1962), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, “Vietnam, 3/1/62–7/27/62,” #8. For later reports on this issue, see Chapter 5, footnote 31.

⁸⁹ In late 1962 and early 1963, there were conflicting reports on the negative effects of air campaigns on the rural community. Nolting argued that the ARVN/MACV had an elaborate system of target selection, and that “official evidence is available in only one case to confirm that innocent people have been killed or injured in interdiction strikes.” In contrast, Edward Rowny (who had been on some 20 operations in South Vietnam) and a returned officer (who also worked in the RVN for ten months) suggested that many innocent people had been attacked by the ARVN as “suspected Viet Cong.” Cable, Saigon (Nolting) to State (Harriman and Hilsman)(25 April 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 197A, “Vietnam General, 5/1/63–5/17/63,” #11b; Memo, Hilsman, “Conversation with Major General Edward L. Rowny” (n.d.), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, “Vietnam Hilsman Trip, 12/62–1/63, Memoranda for the Record,” #3; Memo, Hilsman to Forrestal (4 May 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 197A, “Vietnam General, 5/1/63–5/17/63,” #11a.

which they deserve here in Washington.”⁹⁰ Five days later, Robert Johnson (State Department) judged that the Strategic Hamlet programme in the central part of the RVN was “mostly pure façade,” explaining that “Often creation of a so-called strategic hamlet involves nothing but a very inadequate fence around one-quarter of the hamlet.”⁹¹ Echoing this view, Gen. Taylor reported to McNamara in November that, of 3,353 hamlets that the GVN claimed as completed, “not more than 600 can be viewed as fulfilling the desired characteristics in terms of equipment, defensive works, security forces and, possibly most important, government.”⁹² President Kennedy also received a warning from Senator Mike Mansfield, who visited Saigon toward the end of 1962. In his memo to the President on 26 December, the Senator argued that the insurgency could not be contained in a few years as Gen. Harkins had claimed, and that the United States had to think about a diplomatic solution. The Strategic Hamlets, Mansfield insisted, required an “immense job of social engineering, dependent on great outlays of aid on our part for many years and a most responsive, alert and enlightened leadership” from the GVN.⁹³ In late 1962, the INR and the CIA’s Office of National Estimates also began to produce documents that emphasised some of the key problems in the counterinsurgency.⁹⁴ This led to the year-long dispute over Vietnam intelligence during 1963, which is discussed in the next chapter.

⁹⁰ Cable, Harriman to Nolting, (12 Oct 1962), *FRUS*, Vietnam 1961-1963, vol. II, 300. For Nolting’s reply, see: Cable, Nolting to Harriman (19 Nov 1962), *FRUS*, Vietnam 1961-1963, vol. II, 320.

⁹¹ Memo, Johnson to Rostow, “The Situation in Central Vietnam” (16 Oct 1962), *FRUS*, Vietnam 1961-1963, vol. II, 303.

⁹² Memo, Taylor to McNamara, “Viet Cong Attacks on Strategic Hamlets” (17 Nov 1962), *FRUS*, Vietnam 1961-1963, vol. II, 319.

⁹³ Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, Part 2, pp. 132–133. See also: Memo, Heavener, “Senator Mansfield’s Reactions After Visiting Viet-Nam” (27 Dec 1962), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 10, “Dec. 1962: 7–31”; Report, Mansfield, Boggs, Peel and Smith to Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, “Viet Nam and Southeast Asia” (25 Feb 1963), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 23, “Southeast Asia, 1961–1966, Vietnam: Mansfield Report, 2/25/63.” After reading Mansfield’s report, Kennedy was reportedly told his aide, Kenneth O’Donnell, that “I got angry with Mike for disagreeing with our policy so completely, and I got angry with myself because I found myself agreeing with him.” Kennedy as quoted in Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, Part 2, pp. 133–134. Mansfield’s scepticism also encouraged Chester Bowles (State Department) to play “the role of Cassandra against” in March 1963. In his memo to Kennedy, he warned that the U.S. might soon face “increasing Communist opposition, growing U.S. casualties, and rising public resentment here in the United States.” To change the policy direction, Bowles recommended that Kennedy strengthen the political and military position in the RVN, lay the groundwork for diplomatic negotiation, and head off political pressure at home well in advance of the presidential campaign season in 1964. Memo, Bowles to Kennedy, “Recommendations for a Fresh Approach to the Vietnam Impasse” (7 March 1963), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 11, “Mar. 1963: 1–10.”

⁹⁴ NIE draft in November; Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, Part 2, pp. 130–131; INR, RFE-66, “Capsule Assessment of the Effort in South Vietnam” (19 Dec 1962), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, “Vietnam, 7/28/62–1/31/63,” #5.

Chapter 3

Counterinsurgency: Intelligence Dispute, 1963

Disagreement over the state of the counterinsurgency remained a defining feature of Vietnam policy in 1963. Tension emerged in early 1963 when the CIA's Office of National Estimates (ONE) and the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) attempted to highlight the negative effects of air strikes and strategic hamlets as well as a range of socio-political and administrative problems for the GVN through NIE 53-63 and the post-trip reports by Roger Hilsman (INR) and Michael Forrestal (NSC). However, those parallel efforts failed to change the view of senior policymakers, as the critical edge of the NIE was watered down in its final draft and the Hilsman-Forrestal report had little effect on the attitude of the Pentagon and the U.S. mission. After a lull in disputes during the first four months of the political crisis (May–August), further disagreements over the counterinsurgency became an open dispute between the State Department and the JCS in the NSC meetings in September. While the McNamara-Taylor mission to Saigon from late September to early October restored some sense of unity within the Vietnam policy community, it was only after the fall of the Diem regime in November 1963 that the entire administration, including the Pentagon, recognised the negative trend in the countryside and some of the key problems in the counterinsurgency.

The range of weaknesses that lay behind the rising optimism in 1962 discussed in the previous chapter – such as the political pressure to refute media criticism, the poor intelligence on non-military factors, and the lack of a clear strategic consensus – continued to be a major source of intelligence-related problems in 1963. At the same time, the rivalry between the State Department and the Pentagon became more prominent during 1963. This adverse bureaucratic context brought pressure on both parties to make their assessments simpler and one-sided, reducing the room for a constructive discussion on the mixed developments in South Vietnam in 1963.

1. Doubts of the ONE and the INR (December 1962 - August 1963)

The CIA and NIE 53-63

According to Harold Ford (the chief of the ONE's Far East Staff and one of the analysts who wrote the original draft), the production of NIE 53-63 began in

September 1962 when the ONE analysts were convinced that “behind the signs of some outward improvement lay profound adverse trends.”¹ Their early draft NIE in November 1962 was not entirely pessimistic about the prospect for victory. It argued, for example, that “If the US presence and assistance program are maintained at present levels, GVN military forces will be able to contain the VC military threat and may be able to mount offensives,” and that “If [the GVN] adheres to its present strategic counterinsurgency plan and continues to implement certain promising programs, the GVN may be able to prevent the VC from increasing their present level of domination over South Vietnam’s rural population and establish firmer GVN control over presently contested rural areas.” At the same time, the draft also examined some hurdles to the GVN/U.S. efforts in the countryside, and judged that the “present GVN is not likely to take the political steps necessary to reduce the VC threat to a point where the US could significantly diminish its present involvement in the South Vietnamese struggle.”²

Having re-examined reports from the U.S. mission, the ONE staffs noted in early February that those documents inclined to highlighted progress and depreciated difficulties, that critical information was “frequently prefaced by comments denigrating its source,” and that some of the in-depth studies had a summary introduction which demonstrated optimism “not supported by the details in the accompanying text.”³ This increasingly critical attitude toward positive reports from Saigon partly explains the pessimism in a new draft NIE produced in February 1963, which warned:

The struggle in South Vietnam at best will be protracted and costly [because] very great weaknesses remain and will be difficult to surmount. Among these are lack of aggressive and firm leadership at all levels of command, poor morale among the troops, lack of trust between peasant and soldier, poor tactical use of available forces, a very inadequate intelligence system, and obvious Communist penetration of the South Vietnamese military organization.⁴

When this February draft was submitted to the US Intelligence Board (USIB), John McCone (the Director of Central Intelligence) rejected its negative conclusion, and ordered ONE analysts to seek the view of those who he thought were the “people who know Vietnam best” (including Wheeler, Felt, Harkins, Nolting, Krulak,

¹ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, p. 14.

² Draft NIE 53-62, “Prospects in South Vietnam (Draft for Board/Panel Consideration)” (19 Nov 1962), the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 2 Sept 2006.

³ Memo, CIA/ONE, “Postmortem on NIE 43-61, ‘Prospects in South Vietnam’” (14 Feb 1963), quoted in Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, p. 10.

⁴ Draft NIE 53-63, “Prospects in South Vietnam” (25 Feb 1963), quoted in Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, p. 1.

Hilsman and Forrestal).⁵ Those consultations were hardly constructive, according to Willard Mathias (the Board of National Estimates chairman for NIE 53-63). “They show a general tendency to take issue with a particular sentence purporting to state a fact, rather than an estimative judgment. This or that was ‘too pessimistic,’ but there was no clear line of argument why.” One of the issues they disputed was the alleged mistreatment of the rural community by the ARVN. Gen. Wheeler insisted that he “had received no such reports,” whereas Gen. Felt argued that “Charges of [ARVN] rape, pillage and outright brutality are made by Radio Hanoi.” Gen. Krulak did accept that some of those crimes had been committed, but explained that in Asia it was to be expected that “the soldier will kick the peasant as he goes by.”⁶ At around the same time, Chester Cooper, an ONE officer whom McCone sent to the RVN to investigate the situation, told the DCI that the draft NIE was too pessimistic, and that, except for some part of Delta region, the GVN would defeat the VC “within about three years.”⁷

In the State Department, members of the Vietnam Working Group in the Far Eastern division also complained to the INR that the tone of the draft NIE was too gloomy. (It is not clear whether their criticism was forwarded to the ONE). In February 1963, Chalmers Wood (a member of the Working Group) told Hilsman that although “very substantially improved over the previous versions,” the new draft NIE was “still essentially an unbalanced presentation” and remained “unsatisfactory.” In particular, Wood disagreed with the ONE’s view on the Strategic Hamlet program. In his view, the draft said that the programme was “so badly implemented that it has had little effect on the security situation.” On the contrary, he argued, the Working Group had received no evidence that, as the draft suggested, the GVN was becoming impatient with the time and effort necessary for a carefully integrated development of the project. “I think,” Wood summed up his complaint, “my basic objection to the paper is that it states, quite correctly, that a lasting reduction of the VC threat and the curtailment of US involvement depend upon political and economic measure and increased support from the Vietnamese people, but the paper gives no indication that such steps are contemplated, much less underway. We think they are.”⁸

For a while ONE analysts refused to modify their judgement. As the DCI’s new deadline approached, however, they decided to “shade the estimate in a more

⁵ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, pp. 14-15.

⁶ Mathias, “How Three Estimates Went Wrong,” p. 34. See also: Lewis, “Re-examining Our Perceptions on Vietnam,” p. 52.

⁷ Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, p. 16.

⁸ Memo, Wood to Hilsman, “WG/VN Comments on NIE 53-63: Prospects in South Viet-Nam” (26 Feb 1963), NA, RG 59, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, the Vietnam Working Group, Subject Files, 1963–1966, Box 1, “INR – Intelligence.”

optimistic direction.” Matthias recalled that their attitude changed on the assumption that, if they stuck to the original conclusion, McCone and other parts of the CIA might not go along with it, and that, even if they did, it might evoke even greater dissent by other departments. “[I]f we were so rigid that we invited debate and amendment at the USIB,” Mathias explained, “we might find ourselves with a paper more offensive to our judgment than one which moved slightly toward a less pessimistic view.”⁹ The result was the final NIE 53-63 (17 April 1963), which concluded:

We believe that Communist progress has been blunted and that the situation is improving...Improvements which have occurred during the past year now indicate that the Viet Cong can be contained militarily and that further progress can be made in expanding the area of government control and in creating greater security in the countryside.¹⁰

The publication of the final draft on 17 April did not initiate much discussion among policymakers.¹¹ A couple of weeks earlier, the situation in Laos had become unstable, and that was the main subject at the NSC meetings on Southeast Asia on 10 and 20 April.¹² From May onward South Vietnam itself faced a political instability, and the possibility of a regime change became the focus of the Vietnam policy until late August (see Chapter 4).

The INR and the Forrestal-Hilsman reports

In the State Department, the INR was making a similar effort to emphasise the problems in the counterinsurgency. In his memo to Rusk and Kennedy on 3 December, Roger Hilsman (the head of the INR) argued, “Elimination, and even

⁹ Matthias, “How Three Estimates Went Wrong,” p. 34.

¹⁰ NIE 53-63, “Prospects in South Vietnam” (17 April 1963), the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room, <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 2 February 2007.

¹¹ It is worth noting that shortly after the publication of this NIE, the CIA (probably the ONE) produced the draft memo “Probable Reactions to the Positioning of US Combat Forces in South Vietnam and Thailand” (28 April 1963). This resulted in the ONE document “Probable Reactions to the Positioning of US Combat Forces in South Vietnam and Thailand” (1 May 1963). This memo concluded that “Speaking broadly, we think that the positioning of US combat forces in South Vietnam and Thailand would not in the short term precipitate reactions which would be strongly adverse or dangerous to US interests...Given certain conditions, we believe that the proposed action could in the short term produce reactions favourable to US interests.” Draft memo, CIA to McCone, “Probable Reactions to the Positioning of US Combat Forces in South Vietnam and Thailand” (28 April 1963), NA, CREST 79R00904A000700020003-2; Memo, CIA/ONE to McCone, “Probable Reactions to the Positioning of US Combat Forces in South Vietnam and Thailand” (1 May 1963), NA, CREST 79R00904A000700030017-6.

¹² Memo, “Memorandum for Consideration by the National Security Council on April 10, 1963” (n.d.), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 11, “Apr. 1963: 10–15”; Memo for the NSC meeting on 20 April 1963, “Diplomatic Moves on Laos” (n.d.), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 11, “20 Apr. 1963.”

significant reduction, of the Communist insurgency will almost certainly require several years,” as insurgents “probably continue to look primarily to the long run in South Vietnam and to remain confident of eventual victory.” He was particularly critical of bombing campaigns and crop destruction, which “may well contribute to the development of militant opposition among the peasants and positive identification with the Viet Cong.”¹³

This was followed by the INR Research Memorandum RFE-66 (“Capsule Assessment of the Effort in South Vietnam,” 19 December 1962). The document clarified at least three broad problems: the flaws in military operations (including the over reliance upon large-scale operations and conventional tactics, and the excessive use of air strikes in the absence of ground contact with the enemy which “continues to kill a lot of innocent peasants”); the weaknesses in the Strategic Hamlet programme (such as the confusion among local officers as to the objectives of the programmes, the lack of a coordinated pacification programme, the insufficient attention to defensive, socioeconomic and administrative efforts, and the fact that few hamlets provided benefits to peasants); and the general disregard for the socio-political dimension of counterinsurgency (notably the insufficient effort to improve the lot of the rural population through socio-economic and administrative reform).¹⁴

Shortly afterwards (in late December to early January), Hilsman and Forrestal visited the RVN. After arriving in Saigon, Hilsman observed:

One of the reasons for their optimism is apparently the vigor with which the South Vietnamese government and especially Brother Nhu have pushed the strategic hamlet program...Beyond the above it is hard to see exactly what specific basis there is for the Embassy’s optimism. Partly it is a question of mood. The sense of activity is much stronger...On a factual basis, they cite as reasons for optimism the increased activities of the ARVIN – they are going out more often, attacking more often, and even occasionally engaging in night attacks¹⁵

During the rest of the trip, they met senior U.S. and GVN officers (including Ambassador Nolting, Rufus Phillips, President Diem and his brother Nhu), received a joint J-2 and J-3 briefing at the MACV and attended a Country Team Meeting and Strategic Hamlet Coordination Committee. Carrying more weight in

¹³ Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, Part 2, pp. 130–131. This sentence was also repeated in INR RFE-66, “Capsule Assessment of the Effort in South Vietnam” (19 Dec 1962), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, “Vietnam, 7/28/62–1/31/63,” #5.

¹⁴ INR, RFE-66, “Capsule Assessment of the Effort in South Vietnam” (19 Dec 1962), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, “Vietnam, 7/28/62–1/31/63,” #5.

¹⁵ Memo, Hilsman (n.d.), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, “Vietnam Hilsman Trip, 12/62–1/63, Memoranda for the Record,” #1.

Hilsman and Forrestal's judgement, though, were their first-hand observation on the front line (Phien Province, Plei Ku, Plei Mrong, Dak To, and Dak Pek) and the opinion of Major General Edward Rowny, whom Hilsman had known since they both attended postgraduate courses in international politics at Yale University. Rowny, who had been on some 20 major operations, argued that the interference by Admiral Felt (the commander of CINCPAC) in the details of tactical planning had adverse effects on the MACV. He also showed that the GVN's operations tended to be preceded by warnings to insurgents and "proceeding so slowly as to give the VC ample time to escape." Rowny argued that the ARVN's reluctance to engage in serious fighting with insurgents was due in part to President Diem's demand for a total victory, pointing out that when an operation killed three VC officers and 60 regular VC troops and captured their weapons while the ARVN lost one officer and several men, Diem was furious at this "defeat."¹⁶

After the trip, Hilsman and Forrestal submitted two reports, one for general circulation and the other for the President's eyes only. The 19-page open report focused on the performance of the GVN. While accepting that the counterinsurgency was "clearly going better than it was a year ago," the reports stressed the significance of problems including the lack of an overall strategic plan (which was necessary for setting priority and coordinating different part of counterinsurgency); the neglect of police forces; the "confusing multiplicity" of paramilitary forces;¹⁷ and the excessive use of large-scale offensives (the "search and destroy" operations, as opposed to the more defensive "clear and hold" operations).¹⁸ The "eyes only" annex, in contrast, discussed some of the key problems in the U.S. mission, which included the lack of coordination and leadership, the misuse of air power, and the dangers of transferring covert operations in the Central Highland from the CIA to the Pentagon.¹⁹

Forrestal encouraged Kennedy to draw attention to some of those problems

¹⁶ Memos, Hilsman (n.d.), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, "Vietnam Hilsman Trip, 12/62-1/63, Memoranda for the Record," #1-#17.

¹⁷ The paramilitary forces included "the Civil Guard, the Self Defense Corps, the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG), the Hamlet Militia, the Montagnard Commandoes, the Force Populaire, the Republican Youth, the Catholic Youth, several independent groups under parish priests...and even one small army trained, armed, and commanded by a private businessman to protect his properties in Cap St. Jacques." Memo, Hilsman and Forrestal to Kennedy, "A Report on South Vietnam" (n.d., around 25 Jan 1963), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, "Vietnam Hilsman Trip, 12/62-1/63, Basic Report & "Eyes Only" Annex," #1.

¹⁸ Memo, Hilsman and Forrestal to Kennedy, "A Report on South Vietnam" (n.d., around 25 Jan 1963), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, "Vietnam Hilsman Trip, 12/62-1/63, Basic Report & "Eyes Only" Annex," #1.

¹⁹ Memo, Hilsman and Forrestal to Kennedy, "Eyes Only Annex: Performance of U.S. Mission" (n.d., around 25 Jan 1963), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, "Vietnam Hilsman Trip, 12/62-1/63, Basic Report & "Eyes Only" Annex," #1a.

at the NSC meeting on 1 February, the announced purpose of which was to hear General Wheeler's survey of the military situation in the RVN in January.²⁰ Before the meeting, Forrestal advised the President to raise, "as a matter of stimulating action," a series of questions in line with the problems identified in the eye-only annex.²¹ Forrestal's scheme failed, however, and on 4 August he apologised to Kennedy, saying that the meeting was a "complete waste of your time." He argued that the "rosy euphoria generated by General Wheeler's report" made it difficult to initiate reform through a formal meeting. As "another technique" he recommended "a quiet campaign in the appropriate departments" by Averell Harriman and Forrestal himself.²²

Those episodes in early 1963 were likely to have made Hilsman and Forrestal even more hostile toward the view of the Pentagon and the U.S. Embassy. This partly explains why, after Hilsman became the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs in April 1963 and the political crisis in the RVN started in May, they pushed the U.S. policy toward a regime change without due consultation with other parts of the administration (see the next chapter).

2. Open dispute (September - October 1963)

Disagreement at the NSC (September 1963)

The dispute over the counterinsurgency was muted from May to August as the political crisis remained the primary concern of policymakers. The disagreement returned to the forefront of policymaking in early September after the State Department's effort for a coup d'état in late August failed. At the NSC meeting on 6 September, policymakers agreed that, in order to re-examine the U.S. response to the political crisis, they needed an up-to-date assessment of the impacts of the political instability on the counterinsurgency. Dean Rusk (the Secretary of State) opened the meeting with the suggestion that "over the weekend there should be an interdepartmental effort to pull together and assess all the information available in Washington." When the discussion moved to the U.S. response to the political crisis and Rusk mentioned the possibility of delivering an ultimatum to President Diem, Robert Kennedy (the Attorney General) returned to the point that "we do not yet have sufficient information [on counterinsurgency] on which to base such a

²⁰ Pentagon Press Briefing by Wheeler on Vietnam on 4 Feb 1962, JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, "Vietnam 2/1/63-3/21/63," #1b, 1c, 1d.

²¹ Memo, Forrestal to Kennedy, "South Vietnam" (1 Feb 1963), JFKL, President's Office Files, Country Files, Box 128A, "Vietnam, Security, 1963," #2.

²² Memo, Forrestal to Kennedy, "South Vietnam" (4 Feb 1962), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 11, "Feb. 1963: 1-8."

decision.” Rusk agreed, saying that “before issuing an ultimatum we must reassess that question and we need information to do so.” Then, rather abruptly, the NSC decided that Victor Krulak (JCS) and Joseph Mendenhall (State Department) should be dispatched to Saigon to “sample opinion” among American military and civilian advisers respectively. It was also proposed that John Mecklin (Saigon Embassy) and Rufus Philips (USOM) would do the same with USIA and USOM staff working on the frontline. When the meeting ended, therefore, the possibility of an interdepartmental reassessment of intelligence available in Washington, which Rusk had proposed at the beginning of the meeting, was no longer a priority, reducing the role of the intelligence community in the Vietnam policymaking during the next two months.²³

Krulak and Mendenhall left for Saigon that evening, and after four days of research in the RVN, returned to Washington on 10 September. Their written reports and oral briefings at the NSC meetings on 10 September made clear the basic disagreement between the State Department and the JCS. Krulak insisted that “the shooting war is still going ahead at an impressive pace. It has been affected adversely by the political crisis, but the impact is not great.”²⁴ Mendenhall, in contrast, reported “a virtual breakdown of the civil government in Saigon as well as a pervasive atmosphere of fear and hate arising from the policy reign of terror and the arrests of students,” concluding that “the war against the Viet Cong could not be won if Nhu remains in Vietnam.”²⁵ Mecklin supported Mendenhall’s conclusion, arguing that “There is mounting evidence that the war cannot be won with the present regime, especially in view of the damage done to popular support during the Buddhist crisis.”²⁶ So did Phillips, who also added that “with all due respect to

²³ Memo, State, the NSC meeting on 6 September, JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 4, “Vietnam, White House Meetings, 8/26/63–10/29/63, State Memoranda,” #9.

²⁴ Minutes of meeting (taken by Hilsman), 10 Sept 1963, 10:30 a.m., *FRUS*, 1961–1963, vol. 4, 83. See also: Minutes of meeting (taken by Bromley Smith), 10 Sept 1963, 10:30 a.m. (10 Sept 1963), JFKL, NSF, Meetings and Memoranda, Box 316, “Meetings on Vietnam, General, 9/1/63–9/10/63,” #14; Memo, Krulak, “Visit to Vietnam, 6–10 September 1963” (10 Sept 1963), *FRUS*, Vietnam, 1961–1963, vol. 4, 82; Memo, Krulak to Taylor (8 Sept 1963), NA, RG 218, Records of Gen. Maxwell Taylor, Box 12, “091 Vietnam (Aug 63–Oct 63)” However, Australian Col. Ted Serong concluded in mid-September that “Graphs of key indicators in fight against Viet Cong are now generally levelling off or indeed downward trend by comparison with early June, when they were stable or showed definite upward trend.” Serong’s cable to Canberra, as quoted in: Cable, Saigon to State (25 Sept 1963), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 4, “Vietnam, 9/21/63–9/26/63,” #5.

²⁵ Minutes of meeting (taken by Hilsman), 10 Sept 1963, 10:30 a.m. *FRUS*, 1961–1963, vol. 4, 83. See also: Minutes of meeting (taken by Bromley Smith), 10 Sept 1963, 10:30 a.m. (10 Sept 1963) JFKL, NSF, Meetings and Memoranda, Box 316, “Meetings on Vietnam, General, 9/1/63–9/10/63,” #14. For Mendenhall’s interim report from Saigon, see: Cable, Saigon (Mendenhall) to State (Hilsman) (9 Sept 1963), *FRUS*, Vietnam, 1961–1963, vol. 4, 78.

²⁶ Memo, Mecklin to Murrow, “A Policy for Viet-Nam” (10 Sept 1963), JFKL, Newman

General Krulak's report, the US military advisers were not able to give credible evidence on political attitudes.” This prompted Krulak to argue that “the advisers were not good on politics or palace intrigue but they were good on saying whether or not the war was being won and they do say that the war is going well,” to which Phillips replied that “this was not a military war but a political war. It was a war for men's minds more than battles against the Viet Cong.”²⁷ John McCone (the Director of Central Intelligence) appeared to support the view of Krulak and the JCS. Summarizing NIE 53-63 (May 1963) and SNIE 53-2-63 (July 1963), he argued that “The later forecast trouble but not so great that it would not be possible to correct the situation. The current view of the intelligence community is not as ominous as that expressed by the civilian reporters today.”²⁸ (It is worth noting that the minutes of the meeting taken by Hilsman gives an impression that McCone supported the State's view, recording simply that “Mr. McCone read from the June SNIE that indicated the intelligence community was even then not very hopeful.”²⁹)

The disagreement within the administration continued throughout the second half of September, and, as discussed in Chapter 4, the media attack against the CIA Saigon Station, which was allegedly orchestrated by some part of the State Department, added a new dimension to the bureaucratic tension in the Vietnam policy community. Meanwhile, the media and Congress became increasingly sceptical about the U.S. support for the GVN. David Halberstam's *New York Times* article on 16 September (“Rift with Saigon on War Tactics Underlined by 2 Red Attacks”)³⁰ in particular prompted the CIA and Krulak to investigate and criticise what the Agency called “Halberstam's lugubrious and pessimistic approach to the situation in Vietnam.”³¹ Gen. Harkins also cabled Taylor, Felt and Krulak on 19

Papers, Box 14, “10 Sept. 1963.” See also: Minutes of meeting (taken by Hilsman), 10 Sept 1963, 10:30 a.m. *FRUS*, 161–1963, vol. 4, 83; Minutes of meeting (taken by Bromley Smith), 10 Sept 1963, 10:30 a.m. (10 Sept 1963), JFKL, NSF, Meetings and Memoranda, Box 316, “Meetings on Vietnam, General, 9/1/63–9/10/63,” #14.

²⁷ Minutes of meeting (taken by Bromley Smith), 10 September 1963, 10:30 a.m. (10 Sept 1963), JFKL, NSF, Meetings and Memoranda, Box 316, “Meetings on Vietnam, General, 9/1/63–9/10/63,” #14. See also: Rufus Phillips, “Before We Lost in South Vietnam,” in Harvey Neese and John O'Donnell eds., *Prelude to Tragedy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001), pp. 48-50.

²⁸ Minutes of meeting (taken by Bromley Smith), 10 Sept 1963, 10:30 a.m. (10 Sept 1963), JFKL, NSF, Meetings and Memoranda, Box 316, “Meetings on Vietnam, General, 9/1/63–9/10/63,” #14.

²⁹ Minutes of meeting (taken by Hilsman), 10 Sept 1963, 10:30 a.m., *FRUS*, 161–1963, vol. 4, 83.

³⁰ David Halberstam, “Rift with Saigon on War Tactics Underlined by 2 Red Attacks,” the *New York Times* (16 Sept 1963).

³¹ Memo, CIA, “David Halberstam's Reporting on South Vietnam” (26 Sept 1963) JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 15, “Sept. 1963: 26–28.” See also: Memo, Proctor to Taylor (18 Sept 1963), NA, RG 218, Records of Gen. Maxwell Taylor, Box 12, “091 Vietnam (Aug 63–Oct 63);” Memo, [probably CIA], “David Halberstam's View on the Security Situation in the

September, arguing, “From most of the reports and articles I read, one would say Vietnam and our programs here are falling apart at the seams. Well, I just thoroughly disagree...Thanks goodness I do not get to read the newspapers until they are at least three days old. If I got them as soon as you do, I would be afraid to go to work or I wouldn’t know what to do. All is not black. No, far from it.”³²

Facing the divisions among his advisors and the criticism from the U.S. public, Kennedy sent another mission to Saigon chaired by McNamara and Gen. Taylor in late September. The composition of the mission – about two dozen officers from the Pentagon, the State Department, the CIA and the White House – reflected the need to restore unity in the policy circle. (For the same reason, Kennedy also instructed McNamara to tell the Presidential Palace that Washington was “not open to oriental divisive tactics.”) At the same time, the choice of two chairmen from the Pentagon indicated Kennedy’s intention to make sure that the mission return with a clear-cut report on good progress, thus refuting the doubt in the media and Congress. It was in this context that, in his cable to Harkins before his departure to the RVN, Gen. Taylor said:

[W]e need ability on return to give an eye-ball account of situation in South Vietnam to an increasingly critical Congress. Aid program is endangered by recent events...Our primary objective is to learn not only whether the war is progressing favorably but at what rate it is progressing. On return we can expect to be pressed to assure Congress that the war can be won in a finite period. Hope you will show us all data and indications bearing on this point of rate of progress.³³

“In your short visit,” Harkins replied the following day, “we hope to give you a blow to blow bird-eye view of that been done. To me it’s remarkable, but of course I’m prejudiced and try to keep out of the politics – yet – I know how they are involved.”³⁴ The aim of the mission, therefore, was primarily political, and making an accurate assessment was of secondary importance. This was not fully understood by the civilian part of the mission, some of whom opposed McNamara’s positive judgment on the war effort.³⁵ As Kennedy wanted, nonetheless, the McNamara-Taylor report not only confirmed that the war was going successfully but also recommended that the President withdraw 1,000 troops

Delta” (17 Sept 1963), JFKL. NSF, Country, Box 200, “Vietnam, General, 9/18/63–9/21/63, Memos and Misc.,” #6.

³² Cable, Harkins to Taylor, Felt and Krulak (19 Sept 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 200, “Vietnam, General, 9/18/63–9/21/63, Defense Cables,” #1.

³³ Cable, Taylor to Harkins (21 Sept 1963), NA, RG 218, Records of Gen. Maxwell Taylor, Box 12, “091 Vietnam (Aug. 63–Oct. 63).”

³⁴ Cable, Harkins to Taylor (22 Sept 1963), NA, RG 218, Records of Gen. Maxwell Taylor, Box 12, “091 Vietnam (Aug. 63–Oct. 63).”

³⁵ John Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, pp. 402-406.

by the end of 1963.³⁶

The Sullivan report and RFE-90 (October 1963)

In October, two documents addressed the causes of the intelligence dispute. One is the report “Divergent Attitudes in U.S. Official Community” (5 October) written by William Sullivan (State Department), who, as a member of the McNamara-Taylor mission, was allocated the task of investigating the “nature and the cause of differing opinions and attitudes” in the U.S. team in Saigon. Sullivan saw the problem as the classic case of “the two men who look at the same glass of water – one sees it half full, the other sees it half empty.” He argued that the disagreement stemmed partly from the different natures of the military and civilian operations. The MACV, on the one hand, was directed toward active and physical tasks (such as conducting military operations and building Strategic Hamlets). Those activities were relatively specific, and their progress could be measured easily. As a consequence, according to Sullivan, they felt a “justifiable sense of accomplishment” and a “can-do” or “gung-ho” sense of confidence in their ability to complete their mission. On the other hand, progress was hard to measure for the civilians who were responsible for the politico-psychological aspect of counterinsurgency (such as to “dissuade an oriental regime from its method of governing and to persuade it to use other methods which involve more empathy towards the popular mind”). Consequently, the civilians were inclined to question the developments in the light of the GVN’s reluctance to reform its politics. In Sullivan’s view, the different perspectives were further magnified by the imprecision of the data examined, which gave an “opportunity for a great deal of subjective interpretation.” There were “considerable emotional elements” as well, he added. In the military, this took the form of professional pride: “Any suggestion that success is not being attained is considered a personal affront, a reflection impugning the achievements of the US armed forces.”³⁷

While Sullivan’s report investigated the intelligence problem in Saigon, the INR’s Research Memorandum RFE-90 (“Statistics on the War Effort in South Vietnam Show Unfavorable Trends,” 22 October) tried to highlight the flaws in the Pentagon’s interpretation of its military statistics.³⁸ It shows that, in terms of four

³⁶ Memo, “Report of the McNamara-Taylor Mission to South Vietnam, 24 Sept. – 1 Oct. 1963” (2 Oct 1965), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 200A, “Vietnam, General, 9/22/63–10/5/63, McNamara-Taylor Report,” #1.

³⁷ Memo, Sullivan, “Divergent Attitudes in U.S. Official Community” (6 Oct 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 200A, “Vietnam, General, 10/6/63–10/14/63, Memos and Misc.,” #6.

³⁸ The origins of this document could be the MACV’s response to the Forrestal-Hilsman report (January 1963) discussed earlier. The report suggested that the “clear and hold” operations were neglected by the ARVN, and in mid-February the JCS asked the MACV

indicators (enemy attacks, casualties, weapon losses and defections/desertions) that the Pentagon had been using to measure the general trend, “there appear to have been a number of significant and unfavourable changes in the military situation in South Vietnam since July of this year.” The INR also suggested that the negative turn was due largely to weaknesses in the counterinsurgency itself, rather than a result of the political instability since May 1963 (which the State Department had been refusing to help the GVN to solve). “Even without the Buddhist crisis and the more serious political difficulties following its wake,” the document concludes, “it is possible that the Diem government would have been unable to maintain the favourable trends of preceding periods in the face of the accelerated Viet Cong effort since July 1963.”³⁹

Towards the end of October, the State Department not only circulated about 40 copies of RFE-90 within the executive branch without consulting the Pentagon but also requested the JCS to concur in its release to the Senate Foreign Policy Committee.⁴⁰ More provocatively perhaps, Forrestal sent a copy to Krulak on 28 October and asked: “I wonder if your people feel the need to comment on the referenced memorandum?”⁴¹ The JCS held meetings to discuss its response, and produced a memo to rebut the INR’s claim.⁴² On 7 November, McNamara forwarded the memo to Rusk and wrote: “Dean, attached is the State memo re. the war in Vietnam. Below it are the comments of the Chiefs. If you were to tell me that it is not the policy of the State Department to issue military appraisals without

for comment on this issue. Rejecting the criticism, Harkins informed the CINCPAC that “The proportion of regular forces commitment looks pretty good. Since the first of the year, regular ARVN forces have been supporting 15 clear and hold operations while conducting 17 planned search and clear operations.” Moreover, Harkins argued, in terms of force commitment and time involved, 80 % was “clear and hold” activities.³⁸ In response, the INR re-examine the MACV statistics from 25 April to 26 December 1962, and discovered that, contrary to Harkins’ claim, the number of “hit and withdraw” and “clear and hold” operations were actually 291 (94 %) and 19 (6 %) respectively. This episode might have prompted the INR to critically analyse the MACV statistics. Cable, CINCPAC to JCS (14 Feb 1963), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, “Vietnam Hilsman Trip, 12/62–1/63, Related Documents,” #4; Memo, Whiting to Hilsman, “Level and Character of Large-scale South Vietnamese Military Operations” (19 March 1963), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, “Vietnam Hilsman Trip, 12/62–1/63, Related Documents,” #3.

³⁹ INR, RFE-90, “Statistics on the War Effort in South Vietnam Show Unfavorable Trends” (22 Oct 1963), JFKL, Roger Hilsman Papers, Box 4, “Vietnam, JCS Comments on RFE-90 on Unfavorable Trend of War Effort, 11/14/63,” #2.

⁴⁰ Memo, JCS, “Department of State Research Memorandum RFE-90, October 22, 1963” (4 Nov 1963), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 4, “Vietnam, JCS Comments on RFE-90 on Unfavorable Trend of War Effort, 11/14/63,” #1d.

⁴¹ Forrestal to Krulak, “Statistics on the War Effort in South Vietnam Show Unfavorable Trends” (29 Oct 1963), JFKL, NSF, Box 201, “Vietnam General, 10/15/63–10/28/63, Memos and Misc.,” #13.

⁴² Memo, JCS, “Department of State Research Memorandum RFE-90, October 22, 1963” (4 Nov 1963); Memo, JCS to McNamara, “Department of State Bureau of Intelligence Research Estimate of Military Situation in South Vietnam,” both documents in JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 4, “Vietnam, JCS Comments on RFE-90 on Unfavorable Trend of War Effort, 11/14/63,” #1d and #1e.

seeking the views of the Defense Department the matter will die,”⁴³ which Rusk assured almost immediately.⁴⁴

Just after the release of RFE-90, South Vietnamese generals went ahead with a military coup on 1 November and assassinated President Diem and his brother Nhu on the following day. Although fundamental problems persisted, the regime change in Saigon punctured the yearlong dispute over Vietnam estimates. By early 1964, the negative trend and the near-collapse of the war effort became undeniable. So too was the detrimental effect of spending much of 1963 disputing whether the counterinsurgency was going well rather than how to tackle the key problems, many of which the ONE and the INR had already recognised in late 1962.

⁴³ Memo, McNamara to Rusk (7 Nov 1963), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 4, “Vietnam, JCS Comments on RFE-90,” #1b.

⁴⁴ “Dear Bob, Confirming our telephone conversation about INR’s research memorandum RFE-90 of October 22, 1963, it is not the policy of the State Department to issue military appraisals without seeking the views of the Defense Department. I have requested that any memoranda given interdepartmental circulation which include military appraisals be coordinated with your department. Cordially yours, Dean Rusk.” Memo, Rusk to McNamara (8 Nov 1963), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 4, “Vietnam, JCS Comments on RFE-90,” #1a. For the response of Thomas Hughes (the head of the INR), see: Memo, Hughes to Rusk, “JCS Comments on Department of State Research Memorandum RFE-90” (n.d.), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 4, “Vietnam, JCS Comments on RFE-90 on Unfavorable Trend of War Effort, 11/14/63,” #1c.

Chapter 4

Political Crisis, 1963

The political instability in South Vietnam dominated Vietnam policy in mid- to late 1963. It began with a Buddhist demonstration in the city of Hué on 8 May and ended with a military coup on 1 and 2 November, during which President Diem and his brother Nhu were assassinated. The six-month tragedy had many turns, but the State Department's willingness to remove the Diem regime remained a central element in U.S. policy throughout the crisis. During May and June 1963 when the Buddhist protests began and continued to escalate, State policymakers started drawing up a contingency plan in favour of a regime change and rumours of a coup emerged even before the CIA circulated an in-depth analysis of the Buddhist demonstrations on 28 June 1963. The next phase of the crisis (from July to mid-August) was marked by the disagreement between Ambassador Nolting (who opposed a regime change and tried to help President Diem to reconcile with the protestors) and the State Department in Washington (which assumed that a coup was almost inevitable and advocated a policy of "fence-sitting"). The latter's view was published as SNIE 53-2-63 and contributed to the end of the conciliatory approach that Nolting had been urging Diem to explore. At around the same time, information on coup plots became increasingly complex, and the CIA's Office of Current Intelligence (OCI) questioned the plotters' ability to take action against the Presidential Palace. Despite this uncertainty, the State Department, along with the new Ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, pushed general officers to overthrow the Ngo brothers during the closing week of August 1963. The collapse of that effort exposed the problems in the State Department's approach and the unreliability of information coming through the Saigon Embassy. The following month (September 1963) was dominated by the dispute over the need and merits of a regime change and the "question of Nhu," which was also intertwined with the media attack against the CIA's Saigon Station. During October, Washington's "pressure plan" designed to push the GVN to change its policy proved ineffective, while a coup became increasingly likely, reviving the disagreement between the State Department and the opponents of a regime change (including DCI John McCone). While the November coup itself went relatively smoothly, the developments in the following year showed that rebuilding the nation under a new regime in the middle of a war against an insurgency was much more difficult than the proponents of the regime change had assumed during the crisis.

There were some notable achievements by the intelligence community. The CIA's Office of Current Intelligence (OCI) in particular did produce relatively sound assessment of key topics – including the Current Intelligence Memorandum on the Buddhist protests (dated 28 June), the rumours of a coup (14 and 21 August), the developments after the pagoda raids (26 August) and the GVN's response to aid suspensions (18 October) – although there was problem in timing in some cases. At the same time, however, the intelligence community, notably the CIA's Office of National Estimates (ONE), failed to provide a sound estimate of the probable consequences of a coup d'état. On this issue, the optimism expressed by the INR in RFE-55 (21 June) was accepted as the judgement of the intelligence community in SNIE 53-2-63 (10 July). Although CIA analysts had doubts about a coup and DCI John McCone gave warnings at NSC meetings in September and October, senior policymakers were not fully informed of the potential problems of removing the existing regime. This absence of critical intelligence facilitated the State Department to go ahead with a military coup even in the face of opposition by other parts of the Vietnam policy community.

While this intelligence failure can partly be explained by the technical limits of predicting policy results, it also reflected the way and context in which Vietnam policymaking evolved in 1963. Explaining why Washington moved towards a regime change without careful consideration of its consequences, McGeorge Bundy later recalled:

In part because the process was so confused, so laden with personality clashes, and so distorted and inflamed by publicity that it never got far from the immediate issues of tactical judgment. The process of policy-making was almost at its worst from mid-August through the beginning of October, and thereafter events came so rapidly that time was not taken for reflection. Yet, this is only a part of the reason. The greater part is that all of the participants assumed that the stakes in South Vietnam were so serious as to warrant the deepened commitment...no one in the policy circle suggested seriously that the U.S. start to think in terms of withdrawing with the task unfinished...¹

These problems also help explain the absence of intelligence analysis on the probable consequences of a coup d'état. Especially from late August onward, bureaucratic politics and a range of immediate issues (such as the impact of the crisis on the war effort, the possible effects of pressure plans, and the media attack on the CIA) diverted the attention of the intelligence community away from analysing the consequences of a regime change. The unwillingness to discuss the possibility of a negotiated settlement could also be seen as a source of intelligence

¹ Bundy as quoted in Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, Part 2, p. 205.

failure: for senior policymakers in the State Department – including analysts in the INR – who thought that the war could not be won with Diem and that withdrawal was not an option, a regime change had become the only solution by mid-1963.

1. The Diem regime and the US government before May 1963

President Diem and his family, who were all Catholic, had faced many political problems. The greatest concern for Presidential Diem – and a major subject for the CIA and the INR – was the possibility of a coup d'état. A large-scale coup attempt almost toppled his regime in November 1960.² A year later, both the CIA and the INR recognised a growing discontent within the military and the increasing possibility of another coup attempt.³ This was followed by the bombing of the Presidential Palace by two Air Force aircrafts in February 1962, which destroyed part of the building. In June and August 1962, the CIA's Saigon station again warned the increasing risk of another action against the President.⁴

The authoritarian tendency of the GVN also worried Washington.⁵ Although it had some democratic elements (such as general elections, the parliament and the high court), those institutions were beset with corruption and were too weak to check the conduct of the Presidential Palace. At the same time, the organizations under the control of the President's younger brother Nhu, such as the Special Forces, the Can Lao party and the Republican Youth, played a vital role in suppressing political opposition, while Diem's another sibling, Ngo Dinh Can, reigned over the central part of the country "like an autonomous police state."⁶

By early 1963, some of the senior officers in the State Department, especially Michael Forrestal (a Far East staff of the NSC) and Roger Hilsman (the head of the INR), had come to regard Diem's authoritarian tendency as a primary

² During this abortive coup, one of the CIA agents, George Carver, was at the coup's command centre, reporting the developments to the CAS headquarters. Colby, *Lost Victory*, pp. 76-79. On 8 July, *Time of Viet-Nam* carried an article on Carver's involvement in the 1960 coup attempt. Cable, Saigon to State (8 July 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, "Vietnam, General, 7/1/63-7/20/63," #32.

³ INR, IN, "Coup Plotting in South Vietnam" (28 Nov 1961), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 6, Folder "Nov 1961: 28-30"; Memo, CIA to McCone, "The Diem Regime and Its Prospects" (5 Dec 1961), NA, CREST 79R00904A000800010008-7.

⁴ Cable, CAS to CIA, "Possibility of a Coup D'etat" (15 June 1962), the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 2 Sept 2006; Cable, CAS to CIA, "Warning to President Diem of a Possible Coup D'etat on Night 1-2 August 1962" (1 Aug 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, "Vietnam General, 8/1/62-8/14/62," #2.

⁵ For the Diem regime, see for example: Memo, Kreimer to McCone, "The Authoritarian Tendencies of the Diem Regime" (8 Oct 1963), NA, JFK Collection, CIA Miscellaneous Files, Box 5, Folder "JFK-M-06 (F20)"; Philip Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

⁶ Cable, CAS to CIA, "Apprehension [deleted] Regarding Recent Events in Vietnam" (18 May 1963), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 11, "Apr. 1963: 17-18."

obstacle to the counterinsurgency and consider regime change as a viable option. “[W]e have been pussy-footing with Diem for too long,” Forrestal wrote in August 1962, expressing his frustration with the Palace’s refusal to carry out political reforms.⁷ Unlike Ambassador Nolting who reminded Washington that the Embassy could not “program or control” Diem’s projects,⁸ Forrestal thought that Nolting must use tougher measures to get action from “our bulky satrap.”⁹ It was also in mid-1962 that the INR began to argue that a regime change could be a possible solution to political problems, arguing that a coup “would have a better than even chance of succeeding.” The Bureau identified Vice-President Nguyen Ngoc Tho as a viable replacement for Diem and predicted that General “Big” Minh could be a leading figure of a coup d’état.¹⁰ (Tho and Minh headed the new regime after the overthrow of Diem in November 1963.) After his trip to Saigon with Hilsman in late 1962 and early 1963, which confirmed their pessimism about the war effort, Forrestal moved on to argue that “the risks in remaining too closely tied to Diem’s government will increase rather than decrease as time goes on,”¹¹ and explored the possibility of contacting Diem’s opponents. Apparently in support of this suggestion, the INR in February 1963 provided a list of Diem’s critics in South Vietnam and proposed ways to establish contact with them.¹²

The Pentagon and the CIA had different opinions. In early 1963, the U.S. military continued to believe that the GVN was winning the war and did not feel the need to change the regime. While some analysts in the CIA, especially those in the ONE, shared Forrestal and Hilsman’s pessimism about the counterinsurgency, the Agency had been more cautious about the result of a coup d’état. “The re-establishment of effective government authority and of smooth operation of government service in the aftermath of a military coup would be very difficult,” a CIA memo warned in December 1961, adding that “Dislocations and uncertainties in the chain of command and in the structure of loyalties would provide opportunities for Communist exploitation.”¹³

⁷ Memo, Forrestal to “Karl” (6 Aug 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, “Vietnam, General, 8/1/62–8/14/62,” #8.

⁸ Cable, Saigon to State, “Outline FY 63 Aid Program, Interim Fund Request” (3 Aug 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, “Vietnam General, 8/1/62–8/14/62,” #5.

⁹ Letter, Forrestal to Dungan (3 Aug 1962), JFKL, White House Central Files, Subject Files, Box 75, “CO312 Viet-Nam, 4/16/62–12/31/62.”

¹⁰ Howells, Avery, and Green, *Vietnam 1961–1968 as Interpreted in INR’s Production*, A-II, pp. 2, 11–12.

¹¹ Memo, Forrestal to Harriman, “Contact with Vietnamese Opposition” (8 Feb 1963), JFKL, Schlesinger Papers, WH-19, Folder “South Vietnam,” #4.

¹² Memo, Whiting to Hilsman, “Contacts with Vietnamese Oppositionists” (12 Feb 1963); Memo, Whiting to Hilsman, “Some Opposition Leaders in South Vietnam” (27 Feb 1963) both documents in NA, RG 59, Entry 5305, Box 2, “POL 1 General Policy, Background (Briefing Papers).”

¹³ Memo for the DCI, “The Diem Regime and Its Prospects” (5 Dec 1961), NA, CREST

Those preconceptions played a critical role in the U.S. response to the political crisis from May 1963 onwards. The State Department's impatience with the GVN largely explains the department's uncompromising attitude toward the Presidential Palace and its readiness to accept the risk of a coup d'état. The CIA and the Pentagon's opposition to a regime change was not obvious during the first three months of the crisis when contingency planning was carried out within the State Department. After State's abortive push for an overthrow of the Ngo family in late August, however, the disagreement over the need and consequences of a coup d'état became a major source of bureaucratic tension during September and October 1963.

2. Protest, contingency plan, and coup plots (May - June 1963)

The political crisis started with a local incident on 7 May 1963. Disobeying the decree banning the display of religious symbols, Buddhists in Hué celebrated Buddha's birthday with religious flags flying outside their buildings. The authorities ordered them to follow the decree, even though they had recently turned a blind eye to a similar violation by the Catholic community. The next day, Buddhists staged a protest and clashed with government forces, during which several civilians, including children, were killed and more than ten people were injured. Although the government's promise on 19 May to compensate the families of the casualties temporarily eased the tension, Buddhist leaders went on to present a set of five demands to the government on 15 May. The Palace's reluctance to meet these demands provoked a 48-hour hunger strike on 29 and 30 May, which developed into large-scale demonstrations. The unrest continued until the GVN reached an agreement with Buddhist leaders on 5 June. Soon afterward, however, Madame Nhu (Diem's sister-in-law) further antagonised the Buddhist community by criticising their leaders, and the first self-immolation of a Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, took place on a street in Saigon on 11 June. Five days later, another tentative agreement between the GVN and Buddhist leaders once again prevented the crisis from further escalating. Without a clear breakthrough toward a solution, though, the situation continued to be unpredictable.¹⁴

Among the diverse initial responses within the U.S. government, one of the most pessimistic was the assessment of John Richardson, the head of the CIA Saigon Station (CAS). In his cable of 18 May 1963, he analysed the Hué incident

79R00904A000800010008-7.

¹⁴ For the development from 8 May to 5 June, see: Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, pp. 12–24.

as one of Diem's three "unwise political acts" in recent months. The other two were the dismissals of Tran Kim Tuyen (the Director of the Palace's intelligence and security service called Service d'Etudes Politiques et Sociales, SEPS) and Huynh Van Lang (the head of the southern branch of the Can Lao party), who had been known as two of the most loyal supporters of the Ngo family. Despite having been Nhu's devout "henchman and troubleshooter," Tuyen was removed from his post reportedly because of a "silly women's tiff" between Madame Nhu and Madame Tuyen. This act of "frivolity, ingratitude and lack of perspective" could increase doubt and insecurity within the GVN, while the parallel removal of Lang from his post could cause similar problems among the party's rank and file. Richardson observed that those decisions, together with the Hué incident, were destroying confidence among different segments of Vietnamese society, including public servants, intellectuals, party supporters, and the mass of non-Catholic peasantry. "If this continues," he predicted, "only sycophants and xenophobes will predominate in the GVN and its relations with its people, bureaucracy, army and friendly allies will deteriorate in a welter of petty jealousies, feuds, and prejudices."¹⁵

Ambassador Nolting appeared to see the situation as less urgent and emphasized the uncertainty surrounding the Buddhist demonstrations and the Palace's response. While "individual without genuine religious convictions may attempt [to] exploit issues as means [to] unify anti-regime elements," Nolting argued on 18 May, Buddhist leaders had not yet decided what further action they should take. For its part, the GVN might be willing to accommodate Buddhist sentiment, but remained "unsure how to proceed."¹⁶ Later that month, as the situation became relatively stable, the Ambassador left for a month-long holiday on the Greek islands, leaving William Trueheart (Deputy Chief of the Mission) as the chargé d'affaires in the Embassy.

As protests resumed after Nolting's departure, Trueheart struggled to understand the intentions of both sides. As to the Buddhist demonstration, he suspected that it had already developed into something more political, which might not be settled by the government's concession on religious issues. The Buddhist leaders, Trueheart noted on 31 May, might be using the charge of religious persecution as a "label and façade behind which other groups seek to express opposition to Diem government and exploit situation for various aims."¹⁷ On 11 June, he stressed that the Buddhist movement had radicalised, and that some

¹⁵ Cable, CAS to CIA, "Apprehension [deleted] Regarding Recent Events in Vietnam" (18 May 1963), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 11, Folder "Apr. 1963: 17-18."

¹⁶ Cable, Saigon to State (18 May 1963), *FRUS*, Vietnam, 1961-1963, vol. 3, 129.

¹⁷ Cable, Saigon to State (31 May 1963), *FRUS*, Vietnam, 1961-1963, vol. 3, 140.

activists were reportedly talking about the overthrow of the GVN. In this context, the Buddhists might have responded to the government's further concession by increasing their demands. Even if its leaders made peace with the government, the Buddhist movement might not have been "sufficiently organized and cohesive to back any agreement."¹⁸ Meanwhile, the Palace's attitude remained equally elusive partly because Diem was "predisposed not to take U.S. advice" and reluctant to discuss political issues with the Embassy and as a result Trueheart had to obtain information on the Palace's policy primarily through Diem's Secretary of State Nguyen Dinh Thuan (a Confucian who was playing an important role in the deal between the Ngos and the Buddhist leaders).¹⁹ Because of all this, the situation remained, as Trueheart put it on 6 July, "more than usually puzzling."²⁰

Without solid intelligence on the ongoing crisis, the State Department began to draw a contingency plan for a regime change in June 1963. In this context, the department produced at least two important documents: Joseph Mendenhall's memorandum "Contingency Planning for Viet-Nam: Likely Developments in Current Crisis and Suggested Courses of Action" (14 June 1963) and the INR's Research Memorandum RFE-55, "Implication of the Buddhist Crisis in Vietnam" (21 June).²¹ Both documents predicted that the Buddhists would resume demonstrations, that the dissatisfaction within the military would increase the chance of a coup d'état, and that the U.S. government would have to support coup attempts. Their arguments regarding the probable outcomes of a regime change, however, appeared to be based largely upon wishful thinking. Mendenhall, for instance, argued that the "odds are probably against a Diem victory" because the loyalty of division commanders was "always somewhat questionable" and the Buddhist issue had raised a "serious question" as to whether the troops would obey the order to defend the Ngo family. The risk of insurgents trying to seize some provincial towns during a prolonged coup attempt could be reduced by "having the US prepared to introduce further combat military forces." As to the prospect after a fall of the Ngo family, the INR believed that there was "a reasonably large pool" of unused manpower, which could provide "reasonably effective leadership for the

¹⁸ Cable, Saigon to State, (11 June 1963), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 12, "June. 1963: 10-16".

¹⁹ Cable, Saigon to State (1 June 1963), *FRUS*, Vietnam, 1961-1963, vol. 3, 141.

²⁰ On 6 July, Trueheart confessed to Thuan that he was "finding situation more than usually puzzling." Cable, Saigon to State (6 July 1963) JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, "Vietnam, General, 7/1/63-7/20/63," #28.

²¹ Memo, Mendenhall, "Contingency Planning for Viet-Nam: Likely Developments in Current Crisis and Suggested Courses of Action" (14 June 1963), NA, RG 59, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, the Vietnam Working Group, Subject Files, 1963-1966, Box 2, Folder "POL 1 General Policy, Background (Briefing Papers)"; Howells, Avery, and Green, *Vietnam 1961-1968 as Interpreted in INR's Production*, A-III, pp. 4-5.

government and the war effort.” Based on those arguments, Mendenhall recommended that the U.S. government take the initiative to establish secret contact with prospective leaders (such as Vice-President Tho, General Le Van Kim and General “Big” Minh) in order to make sure that the new regime was acceptable to Washington. On 14 June, the State Department instructed Trueheart to inform Tho that if Diem proved “definitely unable to act as President and only in this situation we would want to back Tho as constitutional successor.”²²

This was followed by the growing rumours of coup plotting. On 26 and 27 June, for example, reliable sources told the U.S. government about separate plots by Tran Kim Tuyen and Huynh Van Lang (two officers discussed in Richardson’s aforementioned cable of 18 May). It was also reported in late June that three groups each planning a regime change (“one headed by former Dien Hoa Province Chief, Lit. Col. Pham Ngoc Thao...; a second called the ‘Tuyen group’; and an otherwise unidentified ‘military group’”) had united.²³

It was after most of these escalatory moves in the first two months of the crisis had taken place that the CIA’s Office of Current Intelligence (OCI) published a study of the Buddhist movement (“The Buddhist in South Vietnam”) on 28 June. The report analysed several key questions. One of them was the nature of Buddhism in South Vietnam, which was, according to the report, not only diverse but also merged with Confucianism, Taoism, animism and ancestor cults. As to the source of religious grievance (that is, the reason behind the Buddhists’ belief that the Ngos were perpetuating the privileged status of Catholics), the report pointed out that Diem’s bias in favour of Catholics in the civil service and the military had been forcing many officers to undergo a “rice bowl” conversion²⁴ and that Ngo Dinh Thuc (Diem’s younger brother and the Archbishop of Hué) was leading a highly visible programme of Church renovation.²⁵ At the same time, the report recognised the uncertainty over the ongoing Buddhist demonstrations. As to the aim of the protest, the OCI stressed that most Buddhist leaders hoped to keep the religious issues isolated from the broader political objective, but that the extremist elements might be determined to keep up the momentum in the hope of an ultimate

²² Cable, State to Saigon (14 June 1963), *FRUS*, Vietnam, 1961-1963, vol. 3, 175.

²³ CIA, Current Intelligence Memorandum, “Coups Rumors in South Vietnam” (14 Aug 1963), NA, JFK Collection, CIA Miscellaneous Files, Box 5, “JFK-M-06 (F20).”

²⁴ In July 1962, Ben Price also reported that a Vietnamese colonel had been “pressured into joining the Catholic church and that other officers had undergone similar pressure”. The colonel was quoted as saying that “membership in Diem’s church was becoming a prerequisite to continuation in command”. Cable, CINCPAC to MACV (9 July 1962), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 196A, “Vietnam General, 7/7/62–7/10/62”, #11.

²⁵ The CAS also reported in May 1963 that Diem’s another brother in Hué, Ngo Din Can, had been “notorious for its favoritism toward Catholics.” Cable, CAS to CIA, “Apprehension [deleted] Regarding Recent Events in Vietnam” (18 May 1963), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 11, “Apr. 1963: 17–18.”

downfall of the Ngo family. "In the prevailing atmosphere," the OCI warned, "the Buddhist movement may increasingly solidify around extremist elements." The report was equally indecisive on the role of the NLF in the Buddhist demonstration. While arguing that "there has been no evidence that the Communists instigated or influenced the Buddhist demonstrations or demands," the report also provided information that indicated a certain level of Communist penetration of Buddhist organisations.²⁶

3. The rejection of reconciliation, the doubt over coup plots (July - 20 Aug 1963)

Fence sitting, SNIE, and the fall of the conciliatory approach

Ambassador Nolting returned to Washington in early July and was briefed about the developments in the RVN. Almost immediately, he judged that a coup had to be avoided and that the U.S. government had to help the Palace to overcome the present difficulties. "[I]f a revolution occurred in Vietnam which grew out of the Buddhist situation," Nolting told Undersecretary of State George Ball on 5 July, "the country would be split between feuding factions and the Americans would have to withdraw, and the country might be lost to the Communists."²⁷ By that time, however, some of his colleagues in the State Department had concluded that a coup might already be inevitable. "We all believe one more burning Bonze will cause domestic US reaction which will require strong public statement despite danger that this might precipitate coup in Saigon," the State Department told McGeorge Bundy (the National Security Advisor) on 1 July.²⁸ At a NSC meeting three days later, Hilsman insisted that "Our estimate was that no matter what Diem did there will be coup attempts over the next four months," adding that "the chance of chaos in the wake of a coup are considerably less than they were a year ago."²⁹ On 8 July, Forrestal informed Bundy of those disagreements within the State Department and recommended the policy of fence sitting:

If our estimate is that Diem will take appropriate measures to pacify the situation and will thus survive, then in our own best interests we could be active in our support of him personally. If, on the other hand,

²⁶ CIA, Special Report, "The Buddhist in South Vietnam" (28 June 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198A, Folder "Vietnam, General, 8/21/63-8/23/63," #85b. The CIA also published a less comprehensive study on the Buddhist demonstration on 3 June: CIA, Current Intelligence Memorandum, "Buddhist Demonstrations in South Vietnam" (3 June 1963), *FRUS*, Vietnam, 1961-1963, vol. 3, 145.

²⁷ Nolting, as quoted in Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, Part 2, p. 147.

²⁸ Cable, State to McGeorge Bundy (1 July 1963), as quoted in Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, Part 2, p. 146.

²⁹ Hilsman at the NSC meeting on 4 July 1963, as quoted in Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, Part 2, p. 146.

our estimate is that his political ineptitude in recent weeks has so weakened his support within Vietnam that he cannot be expected to hold out much longer, then we should be careful to maintain a reasonably friendly touch with potential leaders of non-Communist coup attempts. Our dilemma at the moment is that we cannot yet agree on the estimate. In general, people in Washington are somewhat more pessimistic about Diem's chances of riding this one out than people in the field. You can argue both ways on whose judgment is better at this particular moment. In light of this, my own judgment is that we are entering a period in which our policy must be one of fence sitting, realizing of course that such a policy constitute something less than full identification between our own interests and those of President Diem.³⁰

It was against this background that the intelligence community published SNIE 53-2-63, "The Situation in South Vietnam" (10 July 1963).³¹ Unlike NIE 53-63 in April 1963, this document focused exclusively on the political crisis, and its production was presumably dominated by the INR. As the Bureau's internal study in 1969 points out, the SNIE "not only followed the line taken by INR but quoted large portions directly from the INR paper [RFE-55]."³² As a result, its conclusion largely endorsed the view of the State headquarters:

If – as is likely – Diem fails to carry out truly and promptly the commitments he has made to the Buddhists, disorders will probably flare again and the chances of a coup or assassination attempts against him will become better than even...A non-Communist successor regime might be initially less effective against the Viet Cong, but given continued support from the US, could provide reasonably effective leadership for the government and the war effort.

It is not clear why the CIA agreed to publish this view in the national estimate despite the fact that its conclusion contradicted the Agency's more cautious judgement on a regime change, which was expressed in its memo in December 1961 mentioned earlier as well as through DCI John McCone later in the crisis in September and October.³³ Whatever the reason, the Agency allowed the INR to present its assessment as the consensus of the intelligence community, missing the opportunity to critically analyse the probable result of a coup d'état.

Meanwhile in Saigon, Nolting was doing his best to resolve the crisis

³⁰ Memo, Forrestal to M. Bundy, "Vietnam" (8 July 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, "Vietnam, General, 7/1/63–7/20/63," #40.

³¹ SNIE 53-2-63, "The Situation in South Vietnam" (10 July 1963), the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 10 July 2006. See also: Andrew Priest and R. Gerald Hughes, "American and British Intelligence on South Vietnam, 1963" in R. Gerald Hughes, Peter Jackson and Len Scott, eds., *Exploring Intelligence Archives: Enquiries into the Secret State* (London: Routledge, 2008).

³² Howells, Avery, and Green, *Vietnam 1961-1968 as Interpreted in INR's Production*, A-III, p. 5.

³³ Memo for McCone, "The Diem Regime and Its Prospects" (5 Dec 1961), NA, CREST 79R00904A000800010008-7.

peacefully. After spending a day “urging, encouraging, warning, [and] trying to get President Diem to move in constructive manner,” he finally convinced Diem to issue a Public Proclamation on 18 July.³⁴ On the next day, Nolting requested that the State Department issue a public statement in support of the Palace’s decision, arguing that it would help Diem “to move GVN and to prevent any undercutting of Diem’s broadcast. It may well also cause Buddhists to hesitate before making further demands.”³⁵ Encouraged by Diem’s further concessions on 19 July, Nolting repeated his request for a statement, insisting that “this crisis can be surmounted if Diem will not allow his policy to be undercut from any quarter, and we are working hard at this.”³⁶ The State Department refused to issue a statement, however, arguing that Buddhist agitation was now controlled by radicals who were aiming at a regime change, and that further demonstrations and violence were likely. “In these circumstances and in light [of] coup rumors, it [is] clear we have to deal with [a] most uncertain and volatile situation...We [are] therefore inclined [to] continue for present public posture of noninterference [in] this internal affair, neither favoring Buddhists or Diem in public statements.”³⁷ Nolting sent another cable on 20 July, saying that “Diem’s statement, and the response to it, may offer the last opportunity to surmount this difficulty...It would be [a] pity if the skepticism [in the State Department] were to increase Buddhist skepticism and/or intransigence, and thus lose the opportunity to move this problem towards solution. I again recommend [a] statement along [the] lines previously suggested, which certainly does not go overboard but would [be] effective, and possibly decisive, here.”³⁸ In response, the State Department reiterated its pessimism about the future of the GVN and sent a copy of SNIE 53-2-63 to the Embassy to clarify “our estimate [of the] situation as it looks from here.”³⁹ At this point, the disagreement became clear to Nolting, who confirmed, “I find myself more sanguine about prospects of GVN’s settling Buddhist problem and avoiding coup d’etat than general tenor [of State cable 104 on 20 July] and SNIE.”⁴⁰

³⁴ Cable, Saigon to State (18 July 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, “Vietnam, General, 7/1/63–7/20/63,” #64; Cable, Saigon to State, translation of Diem’s broadcast on 18 July (19 July 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, “Vietnam, General, 7/1/63–7/20/63,” #66.

³⁵ Cable, Saigon to State (109)(19 July 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, “Vietnam, General, 7/1/63–7/20/63,” #67.

³⁶ Cable, Saigon to State (112)(19 July 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, “Vietnam, General, 7/1/63–7/20/63,” #69.

³⁷ Cable, State to Saigon (19 July 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, “Vietnam, General, 7/1/63–7/20/63,” #70.

³⁸ Cable, Saigon to State (20 July 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, “Vietnam, General, 7/1/63–7/20/63,” #71.

³⁹ Cable, State to Saigon (20 July 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, “Vietnam, General, 7/1/63–7/20/63,” #72; Cable, State to Saigon (23 July) JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, Folder “Vietnam, General, 7/21/63–7/31/63,” #2.

⁴⁰ Cable, Saigon to State (25 July 1936), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, “Vietnam, General,

As Diem's 18 July statement achieved very little, the prospect for a violent clash between the GVN and protesters rose sharply. In early August, Madame Nhu once again offended the Buddhist community by saying that all protesters had done so far was to "barbecue a bonze"⁴¹ and criticising Buddhist leaders for "attempting, with much publicity, to revoke even more such macabre insanities."⁴² Two days later (5 August), a young monk, Huynh Van Le, immolated himself, followed by another such suicide on 16 August.⁴³ The GVN, in its part, drew a three-phase control plan in early August to contain violent Buddhist demonstration.⁴⁴ As for the U.S. government, on 8 August the NSC Special Group (Counterinsurgency) had already ordered the Pentagon to develop a contingency plan to evacuate U.S. citizens from the RVN in the event of extreme political violence.⁴⁵

Question over coup plots

In early July 1963, further information on coup plots reached Washington. On 3 July, David Halberstam (*New York Times*) reported, "Some Vietnamese military officers are reported ready to act but they give the impression that they would like the Americans to make a public statement calling for a change."⁴⁶ Soon afterward, the CIA received the details of coup planning by a group of general officers, which included Gen. Don, Gen. Kim, Gen. Khiem, and Gen. Minh. According to a CAS cable on 8 July, Gen. Don argued that all generals "except for one or two" were in agreement with their plan to eliminate the entire Ngo family. The only obstacle identified in the cable was the dissatisfaction among the junior officers. Therefore one of the several stages of the plan was designed to satisfy their interests. After the coup, the new regime would be led by a military ruler advised by a committee of three, while elections would be announced immediately and held within three to six months.⁴⁷

After the meeting between Nhu and generals on 11 July, however, the coup

7/21/63–7/31/63," #6. Nolting issued his own statements in support of Diem, but he was easily attacked by Buddhists.

⁴¹ Madame Nhu, as quoted in Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, p. 230.

⁴² Cable, Saigon to State (3 Aug 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, "Vietnam, General, 8/1/63–8/20/63," #7.

⁴³ Cable, Saigon to State (5 Aug 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, "Vietnam, General, 8/1/63–8/20/63," #11; Cable, Saigon to State (6 Aug 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, "Vietnam, General, 8/1/63–8/20/63," #14.

⁴⁴ Cable, CAS to CIA, "Government of Vietnam Control Plan for Violent Buddhist Demonstrations" (7 Aug 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, "Vietnam, General, 8/1/63–8/20/63," #19.

⁴⁵ For the contingency plan, see several documents in NA, RG 218, Records of Gen. Taylor, Box 12, Folder "091 Vietnam (Aug 63–Oct 63)."

⁴⁶ Halberstam, as quoted in Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, p. 226.

⁴⁷ Cable, CAS to CIA, "Military Plan for Overthrow of the Diem Regime" (8 July 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, "Vietnam, General, 7/1/63–7/20/63," #35. As of July 1963, there were 19 generals officers in South Vietnam.

plots began to look less certain for at least three reasons. Firstly, reports in mid-July indicated that Nhu at the 11 July meeting suggested that he would support the general's coup against President Diem and that he himself, together with his wife, might draw the required plan for it.⁴⁸ While the possibility of Nhu's coup against his brother remained a subject of speculation,⁴⁹ the episode indicated that Nhu was "seeking to divide or entrapping generals," or trying to protect his own position in the assumption that a coup was almost inevitable.⁵⁰ The second source of uncertainty lay in the growing doubt over the ability of Don's group to take action against the Ngo family. The 11 July meeting with Nhu revealed that, contrary to Don's claim, several generals remained loyal to the Ngos "because they owed their advancement personally to Nhu."⁵¹ After the 11 July meeting, no major development was reported on this group's planning.⁵² Furthermore, it had become evident that the actual forces were under the control of local commanders rather than the generals at the centre of Don's circle. Tra Tu Oai (the Chief of the Department of Psychological Warfare) told a CAS officer that "the generals would not be the leaders of [a coup] because they do not exercise effective power in the army. The battalion commanders are the officers to watch because they control the troops."⁵³ Thirdly, outside the military, Tuyen and his close allies were stepping up their preparations for a coup and repeatedly claimed that they were about to take action against the Presidential Palace.⁵⁴ To complicate the matter, the rumour also

⁴⁸ Cable, CAS to CIA, "Coup D'etat plan of Ngo Dinh Nhu" (12 July 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, "Vietnam, General, 7/1/63-7/20/63," #50. See also: Cable, CAS to CIA, "[deleted] Comments on Ngo Dinh Nhu's Meeting with the General Officers" (13 July 1963), Cable, CAS to CIA, "Comments on Reports of Ngo Dinh Nhu's Coup Plotting" (13 July 1963), Cable, CAS to CIA, "Comments on Reports of Ngo Dinh Nhu's Coup Plotting" (15 July 1963), Cable, State to Moscow (for Harriman) (15 July 1963), all document in JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, "Vietnam, General, 7/1/63-7/20/63," #51, 52, 52a and 54.

⁴⁹ For example, the State Department (probably the INR) dismissed that possibility, pointing out that "Most generals despise Nhu, who even more than Diem [was the] implicit target [of] coup plotting." The CIA's Office of Current Intelligence, in contrast, took seriously the possibility of Nhu's coup – or some kind of action with the military's help – against Diem, pointing out a report in early July that "Nhu strongly opposed any concessions to the Buddhists and would not hesitate to act against Diem if he felt it necessary." Cable, State to Moscow/Harriman (15 July 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, "Vietnam, General, 7/1/63-7/20/63," #54; CIA, Current Intelligence Memorandum, "Coup Rumors in South Vietnam" (14 Aug 1963), NA, JFK Collection, CIA Miscellaneous Files, Box 5, Folder "JFK-M-06 (F20)."

⁵⁰ Cable, State to Moscow/Harriman (15 July 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, "Vietnam, General, 7/1/63-7/20/63," #54.

⁵¹ Cable, CAS to CIA, "[deleted] Comments on Ngo Dinh Nhu's Meeting with the General Officers" (13 July 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, "Vietnam, General, 7/1/63-7/20/63," #51.

⁵² CIA, CIM, "Coup Rumors in South Vietnam" (14 Aug 1963), NA, JFK Collection, CIA Miscellaneous Files, Box 5, "JFK-M-06 (F20)."

⁵³ Cable, CAS to CIA, "Analysis of the Buddhist Crisis by General Oai" (16 Aug 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, "Vietnam, General, 8/1/63-8/20/63," #48.

⁵⁴ Cable, CAS to CIA, "Status of Coup D'etat plans of Tran Kim Tuyen's Group" (16 July

emerged that Tuyen's circle had been directing a part of the Buddhist demonstration "for some time" in order to divert the Palace's attention away from the possibility of a coup d'état.⁵⁵

These developments prompted Forrestal to ask Chester Cooper (an analyst at the CIA) to produce a weekly analysis of the coup plotting. (It is worth noting that Forrestal also requested that reports be disseminated only to himself and Hilsman.)⁵⁶ In response, the CIA's Office of Current Intelligence (OCI) produced two documents, both titled "Coups Rumors in South Vietnam," on 14 and 21 August. The first report (14 August) examined the information since late June and analysed the intentions and capability of three main players (Tuyen's group, the generals around Gen. Don, and Nhu). The report argued that Tuyen and his former SEPS colleagues were not supported by the generals, one of whom (Gen. Don) reportedly dismissed those civilians as "young punks." The OCI judged that Don's army-based group had a better chance of launching a coup, but questioned their ability and determination:

They may represent the surfacing of what are really only contingency plans...or even merely discussion on the need for some kind of action. A number of general officers, such as Don and General Duong Van Minh, have long been critical of certain aspects of the Diem regime, but many of them seem to have little taste for political action. Furthermore, their criticisms are well known to Diem and Nhu, and the most dangerous officers have long been deprived of direct troop command, making any plotting dependent the support of their juniors. Some of the generals have demonstrated firm loyalty to the regime in the past, some appear to be pure opportunists, and the majority appear reluctant to risk their positions in any action not certain of success.

The report also argued that Nhu's countermove might jeopardise any plot against his brother and/or himself, pointing out that since the 11 July meeting "we have almost no further reports alleging plotting by high-ranking officers." The report concluded: "While the number and variety of reports do reflect some serious coup plotting as well as a general climate of dissatisfaction, we see at present no firm

1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, "Vietnam, General, 7/1/63-7/20/63," #57; Cable, CAS to CIA, "Coups D'état Plans by Tran Kim Tuyen" (7 Aug 1963); Cable, CAS to CIA, "Possible Coups D'état" (7 Aug 1963); Cable, CAS to CIA, "Possible Coups D'état on 15 August 1963" (15 Aug 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, "Vietnam, General, 8/1/63-8/20/63," #20, 20a, and 45.

⁵⁵ There was also a report that the Tuyen's coup group was directing a part of Buddhist demonstration "for some time" in order to divert the attention of the Ngos from the possibility of a coup. Cable, CAS to CIA, "Buddhist Optimism in Overthrow of Diem regime; Training of Monks, Nuns and Students; and Tentative List of Government Officials" (17 Aug 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198, "Vietnam, General, 8/1/63-8/20/63," #57.

⁵⁶ Memo, Cooper, "Special OCI Memoranda on Coups Plotting in South Vietnam" (7 Oct 1963), NA, JFK Collection, CIA Miscellaneous Files, Box 5, "JFK-M-06 (F20)."

evidence of advanced planning or of immediate determination to act against the regime on the part of any group having real assets.” The second report on 21 August discussed additional information, but reached the same conclusion: “there is no hard evidence of imminent action.”⁵⁷

4. Push for a coup and its collapse (21 - 31 August 1963)

From the pagoda raids to the green-light cable (21 - 24 August)

The GVN raided four pagodas in Saigon in the early hours of 21 August, followed by similar actions in other major cities. On the same day, the President proclaimed martial law, giving the army “full authority in all matters.”⁵⁸ Soon, combat-dressed troops dominated key points in Saigon, while armed jeeps began to patrol the main streets.⁵⁹

In response, the INR published a Research Memorandum, “Diem versus the Buddhists: The Issue Joined” (21 August). After outlining the crisis since May, the report argued that “The sudden injection of the army into the Buddhist crisis has introduced an entirely new factor.” Pointing out that the predominantly Buddhist armed forces had been critical of Diem’s repressive measures and that there had been a flurry of reported coup plots, the INR stressed that “the degree to which Diem can count on the army to suppress further Buddhist moves is most uncertain.”⁶⁰

Soon general officers actually distanced themselves from the actions on 21 August, and began to criticise Nhu for misleading them into these oppressive policies (even though, according to Gen. Don, it was general officers who recommended Diem the use of marshal law, if not pagoda raids⁶¹). On 22 August, Halberstam (*New York Times*) reported that “Highly reliable sources here said today that the decision to attack Buddhist pagodas and declare martial law in South Vietnam was planned and executed by Ngo Dinh Nhu, the President’s brother,

⁵⁷ CIA, CIM, “Coup Rumors in South Vietnam” (21 Aug 1963), NA, JFK Collection, CIA Miscellaneous Files, Box 5, “JFK-M-06 (F20).” This series was discontinued after the dispatch of the 24 August cable.

⁵⁸ INR, RM RFE-75, “Diem versus the Buddhists: The Issue Joined” (21 Aug 63), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198A, “Vietnam, General, 8/21/63–8/23/63,” #44.

⁵⁹ Cable, USAIRA [U.S. Air Attaché] Saigon to RUEAHQ/DIA (21 Aug 1963), NA, RG 218, Records of Gen. Taylor, Box 12, “091 Vietnam (Aug 63–Oct 63).”

⁶⁰ INR, RM RFE-75, “Diem versus the Buddhists: The Issue Joined” (21 Aug 63), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198A, “Vietnam, General, 8/21/63–8/23/63,” #44. It worth noting that Harkins took a different view and argued “It’s a bit premature to crystal ball the hidden mechanisms and internal machinations of this mixed-up country. However, my first thought is that Diem still has confidence in the armed forces otherwise he would not have put them in charge at such a critical time...” Cable, Harkins to Taylor (22 Aug 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198A, “Vietnam, General, 8/21/63–8/23/63,” #67.

⁶¹ Cable, CAS to CIA (24 Aug 1963), *FRUS*, Vietnam, 1961-1963, vol. 3, 275.

without the knowledge of the army.”⁶² Defense Secretary Thuan also told Rufus Phillips (USOM) that “Under no circumstance should the United States acquiesce in what Nhu have done.”⁶³

The Office of Current Intelligence analysed those conflicting accounts in the “Review of Recent Developments in South Vietnam” (26 August). After summarising reports on key issues, the document concludes that Nhu was controlling the situation in Saigon “possibly without President Diem’s assent.” The OCI also pointed out, however, the possibility of “some diffusion of power among Nhu, Diem and the military at the moment,” warning that “The armed forces are not unified and if a military coup is attempted, there is a danger that serious clashes may break out among competing elements.”⁶⁴

Two days earlier, on 24 August, Forrestal, Hilsman and Harriman had already reached a similar conclusion that, as Forrestal told the President, “Nhu is the mastermind behind the whole operation against the Buddhists and is calling the shots. This is now agreed by virtually everyone here.” Forrestal also added: “Agreement is also developing that the United States cannot tolerate a result of the present difficulties in Saigon which leave Brother Nhu in a dominating position...Averell and Roger now agree that we must move before the situation in Saigon freezes.”⁶⁵

Not sharing the CIA’s concern about the disunity in the armed forces and its negative implications for a coup attempt, those senior State officers sent a cable to Henry Cabot Lodge (the new Ambassador who had arrived in Saigon on 22 August) on the same day (24 August), authorising the Ambassador to inform Gen. Don that the U.S. government would support a regime change. On 26 August, State also sent its message to the South Vietnamese through Voice of America: “Washington officials say the raids were made by police under the control of President Diem’s brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu. They say America may cut its aid to Vietnam if President Diem does not get rid of the police official responsible.”⁶⁶

Collapse of coup plots (25 - 31 August)

In Saigon, Lodge pursued his new assignment without asking further guidance

⁶² As quoted in Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, p. 233.

⁶³ As quoted in Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, p. 235.

⁶⁴ CIA, CIM, “Review of Recent Developments in South Vietnam” (26 Aug 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198A, “Vietnam, General, 8/24/63–8/31/63, Memos an Misc.,” #3a.

⁶⁵ Memo, Forrestal to JFK (24 Aug 1963) as quoted in Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, Part 2, pp. 149–150.

⁶⁶ Voice of America, as quoted in Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, p. 239. For the use of Voice of America in support of the US policy, see: Memo, Murrow to M. Bundy (28 Aug 1963), NA, RG 218, Records of Gen. Taylor, Box 12, “091 Vietnam (Aug 63–Oct 63).”

from Washington, regarding himself as a chief tactician on the U.S. side.⁶⁷ Lucien Conein (a CIA officer in Saigon who served as the main channel with the coup plotters) met Gen. Khiem from 26 to 29 August to promise that the U.S. government would fully support his group during the interim period after a breakdown of the central government, and that it would help the families of the generals engaged in a coup in the event of its failure. “As assurance of US intentions,” Conein gave the general a list of the complete inventory of ordnance in stock at the Long Thanh training camps. To back up those efforts, Rufus Phillips (USOM) also met Gen. Kim on 29 August and told him that Conein’s promise was “bona fide and had the Ambassador’s complete blessing.”⁶⁸

Meanwhile in Washington, the NSC meetings from 26 to 28 August revealed that the JCS did not agree with the direction in which Hilsman, Forrestal and Harriman had been pushing U.S. policy, and that Nolting strongly opposed any action against the Presidential Palace. (The CIA gave a briefing but did not join the main debate, as DCI McCone was away and its second-tier representatives, William Colby and Richard Helms, stayed silent.) Harriman and Ball defended their decision to send the cable, insisting that action against the Ngos was necessary.⁶⁹

Yet even to the eyes of those State officers, the prospects of a coup became increasingly uncertain. Initially, reports from Saigon suggested that the generals’ action against the Palace was imminent. The CIA station claimed on 28 August that the situation in Saigon had “reached point of no return,” and that the overwhelming majority of general officers (except for Dinh and Cao) “are united, have conducted

⁶⁷ On 25 August, Lodge requested “immediate modification of instructions” to allow him to make contact with the generals without first asking Diem to change his policy. The next day, the Ambassador complained about the VOA broadcast on 26 August mentioned above, arguing that “It has eliminated the possibility of the generals’ effort achieving surprise...we should not tip off Nhu on our decision...The US must not appear publicly in the matter, thus giving the ‘kiss of death’ to its friends...Department’s earlier telegram giving me charge of tactics is sound and should be adhered to...This is a time which calls for action and very few words.” Cable, CAS to CIA (Lodge to Rusk and Hilsman, using CIA line)(25 Aug 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198A, “Vietnam, General, 8/24/63–8/31/63, CIA Cables,” #2; Memo, CIA to State (26 Aug 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198A, “Vietnam, General, 8/24/63–8/31/63, CIA Cables,” #3.

⁶⁸ Memo, Hughes to Hilsman, “US Assurance to the Generals” (31 Aug 1963), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, “Vietnam, 8/30/63–8/31/63 and undated (II),” #3.

⁶⁹ State, Minutes of the NSC meeting, 26 Aug 1963, JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 4, “Vietnam, White House Meetings, 8/26/63–10/29/63, State Memoranda,” #1; State, Minute of the NSC meeting, 27 Aug 1963, JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 4, “Vietnam, White House Meetings, 8/26/63–10/29/63, State Memoranda,” #2; Minutes, Colby, “President’s Meeting on Vietnam, 27 Aug 1963” (30 Aug 1963), NA, JFK Collection, CIA Miscellaneous Files, Box 5, Folder “JFK-M-06 (F9)”; State, Minutes of the NSC meeting, 12:00 noon, 28 Aug 1963, JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 4, Vietnam, White House Meetings, 8/26/63–10/29/63, State Memoranda,” #3; State, Minute of the NSC meeting, 6:00 p.m., 28 Aug 1963, JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 4, “Vietnam, White House Meetings, 8/26/63–10/29/63, State Memoranda,” #4.

prior planning, realize that they must proceed quickly, and understand that they have no alternative but to go forward.”⁷⁰ On 27 August, however, Lodge acknowledged that “as of now, there are no signs...that these or any other generals are really prepared to act against the government.”⁷¹ It was around this time that the State Department began to notice some gaps in the reports from Saigon. Hilsman told Lodge on 27 August that “Examination of reports to date gives considerable hope but leaves unanswered questions,” which included the comparative strength of forces in Saigon area, Nhu’s own capability for a counter-coup, and the chance for a successful coup in the case in which initial operations were indecisive.⁷² In response, Lodge admitted the next day that “In appraising current prospects, it must be born in mind that our knowledge of composition of coup group and their plans is derived from single source.”⁷³ Then on 29 August, the CIA station produced a report on the probable loyalties not only of several high-ranking generals in the army but also of the key units in and around Saigon, including the Presidential Guard, Airborne Brigade, Navy, Air Force and Special Force, and suggested a significant uncertainty as to their loyalties in the event of a coup attempt.⁷⁴

Despite the lack of solid intelligence from Saigon, policymakers reached the consensus at the 29 August NSC meeting not to reverse the instructions to the Ambassador. By the time they arrived at another NSC meeting on 30 August, however, it had become clear that the general officers had abandoned their plot. Gen. Khiem told Harkins that the generals decided not to go ahead because “they did not have enough forces under their control compared to those under the President.” Khiem also suggested that they could not fully trust the U.S. support

⁷⁰ Memo, CIA to White House, State and JSC (28 Aug 1963), forwarding a CAS cable to the CIA on 28 August (28 Aug 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198A, “Vietnam, General, 8/24/63–8/31/63, CIA Cables,” #13. It is worth noting that, unlike later in the crisis, the CAS at this point firmly supported a coup, and called for full support from the US government. In the same cable, the CAS argued: “If the Ngo family wins now, they and Vietnam will stagger on to final defeat at the hands of their own people and the Viet Cong...we all understand that the effort must succeed and that whatever needs to be done on our part must be done. If this attempt by the generals does not take place or if it fails, we believe it no exaggeration to say that Vietnam runs serious risk of being lost over the course of time.”

⁷¹ Cable, Saigon to State (27 Aug 1963), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, “Vietnam, 8/27/63,” #1.

⁷² Cable, State to Saigon (27 Aug 1963), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 3, “Vietnam, 8/27/63,” #8.

⁷³ Cable, Saigon to State (28 Aug 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198A, “Vietnam, General, 8/24/63–8/31/63, State Cables,” #56.

⁷⁴ Cable, CIA to State (29 Aug 1963), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 14, “29 Aug. 1963.” Based largely on this CIA cable, a chart of units in the Saigon area was also produced: Memo, “Unites in the Immediate Saigon Area” (n.d., around 30 Aug 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 198A, “Vietnam, General, 8/24/63–8/31/63, Memos an Misc.,” #20b. See also Harkin’s assessment of units’ loyalty; Cable, Harkins to Taylor, (27 Aug 1963), NA, RG 218 Records of Gen. Taylor, Box 12, “Vietnam (Aug 63–Oct 63).”

promised by Conein, as he was a low-ranking officer in the CIA. The alleged friendship between Nhu and CAS chief John Richardson also caused the suspicion that Nhu and his wife were on the CIA payroll.⁷⁵ During the same meeting on 30 August, Gen. Clifton Carter (the Deputy Director of the CIA) also reported that Nhu was apparently trying to ease the tension with the Buddhist community, pointing out the creation of a new inter-sect committee, Madame Nhu's silence, the easing of the curfew, and the release of the students.⁷⁶

At this point, the unreliability of information coming through the Saigon Embassy became hard to ignore. Expressing its "uneasiness at the absence of bone and muscle as seen from here," the State Department told Lodge on 30 August:

Generals so far appear [to] have no plan and little momentum...Central question therefore comes to be how much reality there is in attitude expressed by generals with whom contacts have been made and their capabilities and determinations with respect to what has been said thus far. The distinction between what is desirable and what is possible is one which we may have to face in the next few days.⁷⁷

At the beginning of the NSC meeting on 31 August, Dean Rusk (the Secretary of State) asked "why a coup had been considered by the US in the first place." He argued, and McNamara agreed, that "it was unrealistic to begin by assuming that Nhu would have to be removed."⁷⁸

5. Dispute (September 1963)

At the NSC meeting on 6 September, as discussed in the previous chapter, policymakers agreed that they needed an up-to-date assessment of the impact of the political crisis on the war effort in the countryside in order to make an informed decision. As a result, Krulak and Mendenhall were dispatched to South Vietnam for a four-day fact-finding mission. Upon their return, they presented conflicting reports at the NSC meeting on 10 September. This left the dispute on the general approach to the crisis unresolved. During the NSC meetings from 10 to 12 September, State officials – Hilsman and Meklin – insisted that tough pressure

⁷⁵ Cable, Harkins to Taylor (30 Aug 1963), NA, RG 218, Records of Gen. Taylor, Box 12, "091 Vietnam (Aug 63–Oct 63)."

⁷⁶ Minutes of meeting (taken by Hilsman), "Viet-Nam, August 30 1963" (30 Aug 1963), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 4, "Vietnam, White House Meetings, 8/26/63–10/29/63, State Memoranda," #6. On 2 September, Nhu also told Lodge that he would abandon his role in the government and his wife would go abroad. Cable, Saigon to State (2 Sept 1963), *FRUS*, 1963-1961, vol. 4, 44.

⁷⁷ Cable, State to Saigon (30 Aug 1963), as quoted in Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, Part 2, p. 159.

⁷⁸ Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, Part 2, pp. 160-161.

at the risk of a coup d'état was necessary, while McNamara, Taylor and Gilpatrick all questioned the need for and long-term benefits of such policy.⁷⁹ McCone also expressed his doubt about alternative leadership, arguing that, although he had heard some names, he knew of "no paper which listed a group which could form a government strong enough to rule if Diem and Nhu were removed."⁸⁰

While the disagreement over policy direction remained unsettled, the main focus of the Vietnam policy circle shifted to Nhu's response to U.S. pressures. Nhu was reportedly conducting "virulent public and private anti-American campaigns"⁸¹ and allegedly ordered a student demonstration against the Embassy in which his agents would assassinate Lodge and other Embassy officials and set fire to the building. "For Diem and Nhu even to be thinking of my assassination is so unbelievably idiotic that a reasonable person would reject it out of hand," Lodge cabled Rusk and Harriman on 10 September, "But Nhu is apparently pleased with his raids on the Buddhist pagodas last summer and is said to be annoyed with me for having advised him to leave the country for a while. Also he is reported to be smoking opium. For all these reasons my associates here, whose experience antedates mine, consider assassination to be real possibility."⁸² It was also around

⁷⁹ Minutes of meeting (taken by Smith), "Memorandum of conference with the President, 10 Sept 1963, 10:30 AM," JFKL, NSF, Meetings and Memoranda, Box 316, "Meetings on Vietnam, General, 9/1/63–9/10/63," #14; Minutes of meeting (taken by Smith), "Meeting at State Department, 10 Sept 1963, 5:45 PM" JFKL, NSF, Meetings and Memoranda, Box 316, "Meetings on Vietnam, General, 9/1/63–9/10/63," #18; Minutes of meeting (taken by Colby), "NSC Executive Committee Meeting on Vietnam, 10 Sept 1963" (12 Sept 1963) NA, JFK Collection, CIA Miscellaneous Files, Box 5, Folder "JFK-M-06 (F7)"; Minutes of meeting (taken by Smith), "Meeting in the Situation Room (without the President), September 11, 1963, 6:00 PM – Subject: Vietnam," JFKL, NSF, Meeting and Memoranda, Box 316, "Meetings on Vietnam, General, 9/11/63–9/12/63," #5; Minutes of meeting (taken by Smith), "Memorandum of Conference with the President, September 11, 1963, 7:00 PM – Subject: Vietnam," JFKL, NSF, Meeting and Memoranda, Box 316, "Meetings on Vietnam, General, 9/11/63–9/12/63," #8; Minutes of meeting (taken by Colby), "Presidential Meeting on Vietnam, 11 Sept 1963 NA, JFK Collection, CIA Miscellaneous Files, Box 5, Folder "JFK-M-06 (F7)"; Minutes of meeting (taken by Smith), "Meeting in the Cabinet Room (without the President), September 12, 1963, 6:00 PM – Subject: Vietnam," JFKL, NSF, Meeting and Memoranda, Box 316, "Meetings on Vietnam, General, 9/11/63–9/12/63," #10; Minutes of meeting (taken by Colby), "NSC Executive Committee Meeting on Vietnam, 12 Sept 1963" (16 Sept 1963) NA, JFK Collection, CIA Miscellaneous Files, Box 5, "JFK-M-06 (F7)."

⁸⁰ Minutes of the meeting at the State Department, 10 Sept 1963, JFKL, NSF, Meetings and Memoranda, Box 316, "Meetings on Vietnam, General, 9/1/63–9/10/63," #18.

⁸¹ Memo, Hughes to Rusk, "The Problem of Nhu" (15 Sept 1963), JFKL, NSF, Meetings and Memoranda, Box 317, "Meetings on Vietnam, 9/16/63 (B)," #5.

⁸² Cable, Lodge to Rusk and Harriman (10 Oct 1963), *FRUS*, Vietnam 1961–1963, vol.4, 193. The State Department regarded such plot as unlikely but could not completely discount it, whereas McCone described Lodge's response as rather hysterical. Cable, State to Saigon (10 Oct 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 200A, "Vietnam, General, 10/6/63–10/14/63, Memos and Misc.," #14; Cable, Lodge to Rusk and Harriman (10 Oct), *FRUS*, Vietnam 1961–1963, vol. 4, 193, editorial note 3. See also: Cable, Saigon to State, "Physical Security of the American Embassy in Saigon" (10 Oct 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 200A, "Vietnam, General, 10/6/63–10/14/63, Memos and Misc.," #11; Cable, CAS to CIA, "Plan of Government to Assassinate Ambassador Lodge, Other High

this time that the intelligence community began to analyse the possibility of Nhu's contact with the North Vietnamese government through Polish ICC Commissioner Mieczyslaw Maneli (the so-called Maneli affair).⁸³ On 14 September, the CIA judged that "Although we do not feel that there is great danger of an imminent GVN arrangement of some form with the North...they might at some juncture seek to work out a modus vivendi with the North, out of belief that a deal with kindred peoples was better than submitting to foreign (US) pressures."⁸⁴ Another memo on the same issue on 19 September written by Chester Cooper (CIA) also suggested that several motives – notably a desire to increase their manoeuvrability in face of U.S. pressure – "could induce (or may have already induced) the Ngo's to explore the possibilities of rapprochement with Hanoi."⁸⁵

For senior officers in the CIA, however, of greater concern in September appeared to be the media criticism of the Agency's Saigon Station (CAS), which started around 9 September. A *San Francisco Chronicle* editorial reported on that day that the CIA was "paying the salaries of the police army in Vietnam, called the Special Forces, that raids Buddhist pagodas and knocks students off their bicycles," and called for the abolition of "this organization of international wrong-wirepullers"⁸⁶ In an interview on the same day, David Brinkley and Chet Huntley told President Kennedy that "In the last 48 hours there have been a great many conflicting reports from there about what the CIA was up to" and asked the President whether the CIA was making its own policy without coordinating it with other departments.⁸⁷ Although the President denied that allegation, the criticism

Embassy Officials, and Thich Tri Quang, and Burn the Chancery" (10 Sept 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 200A, "Vietnam, General, 10/6/63–10/14/63, CIA Reports," #9. As to Nhu's alleged opium smoking, Thomas Hughes (the head of the INR) also reported to Rusk on 15 September that "Both Nguyen Dinh Thuan and Vo Van Hai testify to Nhu's opium smoking during the past years, providing at least partial explanation for his excess of self-confidence and fantasies of power." Memo, Hughes to Rusk, "The Problem of Nhu" (15 Sept 1963), JFKL, NSF, Meetings and Memoranda, Box 317, "Meetings on Vietnam, 9/16/63 (B)," #5.

⁸³ For the Maneli affair, see for example: Margaret Gnoinska, "Poland Vietnam, 1963: New Evidence on Secret Communist Diplomacy and the 'Maneli Affair,'" *Cold War International History Project Working Paper* #45 (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2005); Philip Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2003), pp. 194-198.

⁸⁴ CIA, Current Intelligence Memorandum, "The Possibility of a GVN Deal with North Vietnam" (14 Sept 1963), JFKL, NSF, Meetings and Memoranda, Box 317, "Meetings on Vietnam, 9/16/63 (B)," #8.

⁸⁵ Memo, CIA to McCone, "Possible Rapprochement between North and South Vietnam" (19 Sept 1963) JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 200, "Vietnam, General, 9/18/63–9/21/63, Memos and Misc.," #13. See also: Cable, CAS to CIA, "1. Ngo Dinh Nhu Intention to Deal with VC; 2. Attempt of Pham Ngo Thao to Arrange Air Force Support for a Coup D'etat" (24 Sept 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 200, "Vietnam, General, 9/22/63–10/5/63, CIA Reports," #5.

⁸⁶ "The CIA in Vietnam," the *San Francisco Chronicle* (9 Sept 1963), NA, CREST 80B01676R000100070008-8.

⁸⁷ Memo, Office of the White House Press Secretary, "Interview of the President by Mr.

continued throughout September. In his article in the *Evening Star* (“CIA’s Blunders in Viet Nam”) on 23 September, Max Freedman claimed that, although unspecified State officers who criticised the CIA had no desire to stir up a row within the administration, “With the evidence in their hands of the incredible and garish blunders committed in a sickening sequence by the CIA, these men in the State Department would be false to their trust if they remained silent while omens of disaster steadily accumulated.”⁸⁸ This was followed by Richard Starnes’ article in the *Washington Daily News* (“‘Arrogant’ CIA Disobey Orders in Viet Nam”) on 2 October, in which he argued that the story of the CIA’s role in the RVN was “a dismal chronicle of bureaucratic arrogance, obstinate disregard of orders, and unrestrained thirst for power,” adding that the Agency “flatly refused to carry out instruction from Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge.”⁸⁹

Many suspected that those criticisms were fuelled by Lodge (who possibly saw the CIA’s tie with Nhu’s Special Forces as a main contributing factor to the collapse of a coup plot in late August) and/or other officers in the State Department (such as Harriman) who continued to advocate a regime change. According to Harold Ford, James Reston of the *New York Times* told McCone that anti-CAS stories had been planted “probably a good deal of it from Harriman.”⁹⁰ Embarrassed by comments allegedly originated in his department, George Ball (the Undersecretary of State) telephoned McCone on 24 September and promised that he and his colleagues would try to “straighten this one out.”⁹¹ Even Hilsman, who had long been avoiding the press “like a plague,” volunteered to become McCone’s “unofficial public relations officer” who would defend the CAS through press interviews and Congressional briefings.⁹²

Eventually, though, the CIA decided to recall Richardson on 5 October. The decision can partly be explained by the fact that his identity was compromised in the aforementioned article by Richard Starnes on 2 October. However, as McCone

David Brinkley and Mr. Chet Huntley for the Huntley-Brinkley Report, September 9, 1963” (9 Sept 1963), JFKL, NSF, Meetings and Memoranda, Box 316, Folder “Meetings on Vietnam, General, 9/1/63–9/10/63,” #16.

⁸⁸ Max Freedman, “CIA’s Blunders in Viet Nam,” the *Evening Star* (23 Sept 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 200A, “Vietnam General, 9/22/63–10/5/63, Memos and Misc.,” #4. See also: Memo, Hilsman to Ball, “Max Freedman’s Article ‘CIA’s Blunders in Viet Nam’” (23 Sept 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 200A, “Vietnam General, 9/22/63–10/5/63, Memos and Misc.,” #7a.

⁸⁹ Richard Starnes, “‘Arrogant’ CIA Disobey Orders in Viet Nam,” the *Washington Daily News* (2 Oct 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 200A, “Vietnam General, 9/22/63–10/5/63, Memos and Misc.,” #20.

⁹⁰ Ford, *CIA and Vietnam Policymakers*, pp. 35–36.

⁹¹ Memorandum of conversation, Ball and McCone, 24 Sept 1963, 12:30 p.m., JFKL, Ball Papers, Box 9, “Subjects, Vietnam, 1/15/62–10/4/63.”

⁹² Memo, Hilsman (1 Oct 1963), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 4, “Vietnam, 10/1/63–10/4/63,” #4a; Memo, Hilsman to McCone (9 Oct 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 200A, “Vietnam, General, 10/6/63–10/14/63, Memos and Misc.,” #9.

stated at the executive session of the Senator Foreign Relations Committee on 10 October, Richardson was recalled primarily to give the U.S. government “more freedom for carrying forward on our current policy.”⁹³

6. Pressure plan, coup plot and last minute dispute (October 1963)

The current policy in question was agreed upon on 5 October. Based on the McNamara-Taylor post-trip report on 2 October, the decision was made to impose sanctions against the GVN, including the withdrawal of aid to Nhu’s Special Forces and the suspension of the Commodity Import Program, which had been serving as economic aid to the GVN. It was also agreed that Ambassador Lodge had to continue his current posture of “cool correctness” in his relation with the Presidential Palace, keeping his distance in order to make President Diem come to the Ambassador.⁹⁴

On the same day, a report on a new plot by general officers led by Gen. Minh reached Washington.⁹⁵ In response, the State Department, with Kennedy’s approval, told Lodge on 6 October that policymakers in Washington “do not wish to stimulate coup” but “also do not wish to leave impression that U.S. would thwart a change of government or deny economic and military assistance to a new regime.” The cable added that, while the U.S. government “should avoid being drawn into reviewing or advising on operational plans or any other act which might tend to identify US too closely with change in government,” it would “welcome information which would help us assess character of any alternative leadership.”⁹⁶ On 10 October, Lucien Conein assured Gen. Minh that the United States would not oppose a coup, and that it would offer necessary support to a new regime. After

⁹³ Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, Part 2, p. 194.

⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 187-188.

⁹⁵ At Don’s suggestion on 2 October, and with Lodge’s approval, Conein met Minh on 5 October, and the latter told the former that his group had three specific plans. One of them was to assassinate Nhu but keeping Diem as a figurehead. The other two involved actions by the Army against Nhu’s Special Forces. Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, Part 2, pp. 189-190. It is worth noting that on the same day (5 October), the CAS reported that it had recommended the first plan to Lodge, arguing that “we do not set ourselves irrevocably against the assassination plot, since the other two alternative means either a blood bath in Saigon or a protracted struggle.” DCI McCone immediately ordered the CAS to withdraw the recommendation to Lodge, arguing that the CIA “cannot be in position of stimulating, approving, or supporting assassination, but on the other hand, we are in no way responsible for stopping every such threat of which we might receive even partial knowledge... We believe engaging ourselves by taking position on this matter opens door too easily for probes of our position re others, re support of regime, et cetera. Consequently believe best approach is hands off. However, we naturally interested in intelligence on any such plan.” The CAS and McCone as quoted in Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, Part 2, p. 190.

⁹⁶ Cable, Washington to Saigon (9 Oct 1963) as quoted in Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, Part 2, p. 191.

those exchanges, there appeared to be no major report to Washington on coup plots until 23 October.

Meanwhile in mid-October, it became reasonably obvious that the GVN was not responding to aid suspensions as the U.S. government wished. In his memo “Ngo Dinh Nhu’s Possible Reactions to Aid Withholding” (18 October), James Montgomery (State Department) suggested that Nhu had been prompting discussions on how to survive without U.S. aid. Montgomery predicted that Nhu would scrap socioeconomic projects sponsored by the United States (such as village health programmes and hamlet schools) that were not essential to the government’s control over the population. Nhu would also disband the Self Defense Corps and the Civil Guards, and turn over their weapons to his Republican Youth so that the latter could assume a larger role in the rural areas. Montgomery concluded that Nhu would “possibly consider present aid pressures as a welcome excuse to bring about certain changes in the rural scene [which could] get the Americans out of the countryside.”⁹⁷ A study by the CIA’s Office of Current Intelligence (“Events and Developments in South Vietnam, 5–18 October”) on 19 October reached a similar conclusion that “Diem and Nhu are not appreciably moved by US actions to date and are preparing to dig in for a protracted war of attrition with the US.” The report added that the Palace would seek to dissipate pressures for reform “by exploiting any differences which may emerge among US policy-makers.”⁹⁸

Joseph Neubert (State Department) feared that such differences were already emerging in Washington. On 18 October, he warned Hilsman that “we are heading into a period of considerable difficulty in maintaining cohesion and momentum in our policy toward the GVN,” and predicted that the first serious problem would arise with the CIA. He noted that at the meeting of the Special Group (Counterinsurgency) on 16 October McCone argued – “at some length and reportedly with considerable vigor” and, in Neubert’s view, in an attempt to assert for the record one of his “familiar” instinctive feelings – that the United States was going to face an “explosion” in the RVN. The DCI warned that the cumulative effect of aid suspension would bring the war efforts to a head much sooner than the original estimate of two to four months and that the Viet Cong would exploit the

⁹⁷ Memo, Montgomery to Kattenburg, “Ngo Din Nhu’s Possible Reaction to Aid Withholding” (18 Oct 1963), NA, RG 59, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, the Vietnam Working Group, Subject Files, 1963–1966, Box 1, “INR–Intelligence.” See also: Memo, Kattenburg to Hilsman, “Estimate of Trend in Viet-Nam Situation” (18 Oct 1963), NA, RG 59, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, the Vietnam Working Group, Subject Files, 1963–1966, Box 1, “INR–Intelligence.”

⁹⁸ CIA Memorandum, “Events and Developments in South Vietnam, 5–18 October” (19 Oct 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 201, Folder “Vietnam, General, 10/15/63–10/28/63, Memos and Misc.,” #3a.

chaos that could ensue. In Neubert's prediction, McCone would soon argue that the consequences of the present course were going to be "unhelpful in the extreme" and that Washington, therefore, had to edge quite rapidly back toward the policy before August 1963. "Unless we can effectively refute the argument that our present course is trending toward 'an explosion,'" Neubert argued, "we are going to have to assert with some considerable confidence that such an explosion is to our benefit."⁹⁹

In late October, McCone actually called for reconciliation with Diem and Nhu, but in a different policy context. On 24 October, Gen. Don Conein told that his group would launch a coup d'état no later than 2 November.¹⁰⁰ During the rest of the month, Robert Kennedy (the Attorney General), the Pentagon and the CIA all expressed their doubts on the generals' ability to govern the country. At the NSC meetings on 25 October, McCone argued that even if the generals successfully overthrow the Ngos, they would face a period of political confusion because the generals involved in the coup plotting were incapable of providing immediate, dynamic leadership. "We forecast that the political confusion would then end up, quite possibly, in another coup at some undetermined future time...it was possible that the war might be lost during the interregnum and period of political confusion." Based on this prediction, McCone insisted that the U.S. government had to return to work with Diem and Nhu, and that Lodge should not "sit stony faced waiting for Diem to talk to him but rather he should talk to Diem and get the issues out on the table."¹⁰¹ At the meeting on 29 October, Robert Kennedy, Gen. Maxwell Taylor and McCone argued, as the DCI summarised, that "the failure of a coup would be a disaster" and that "a successful coup would have a harmful effect on the war effort."¹⁰²

In response, the State Department produced a lengthy memo toward the end of October, emphasising the negative aspects of the GVN. According to its author (possibly William Sullivan), the document was written specifically to "brainwash" McNamara.¹⁰³ As mentioned in the previous chapter, it was also in late October that the INR released its Research Memorandum RFE-99, showing that, contrary to

⁹⁹ Neubert to Hilsman, "Maintaining Momentum in Our Vietnam Policy" (18 Oct 1963), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 4, "Vietnam, 10/6/63–10/31/63," #7.

¹⁰⁰ Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken*, p. 259.

¹⁰¹ Memo, McCone, "Meeting with the President, etc. 25 Oct 1963 re. Vietnam," NA, JFK Collection, CIA Miscellaneous Files, Box 5, "JFK-M-06 (F15)."

¹⁰² Minutes of meeting (taken by Bromley Smith), "Memorandum of Conference with the President, Oct 29, 1963, 4:20 PM, Subject: Vietnam" (29 Oct 1963), JFKL, NSF, Meetings and Memoranda, Box 317, "Meetings on Vietnam, 10/29/63," #3.

¹⁰³ Memo, "WS" [possibly William Sullivan] to "Joe" [possibly Joseph Mendenhall] (n.d.), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 4, "Vietnam, 10/6/63–10/31/63," #20; Memo, "Political Situation and Trends" (n.d.), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 4, "Vietnam, 10/6/63–10/31/63," #20a.

the JCS's claim, the counterinsurgency was not going successfully under the Diem regime.

7. Coup and after (November 1963)

Before those last-minute disputes produced any decisive action by Washington, the generals launched a coup at around 1.45 p.m. Saigon time on 1 November. On the next day, Diem and Nhu, who had escaped to a residence in the suburb of Cholon, were taken captive and assassinated on the way to the generals' headquarters.¹⁰⁴

The U.S. government had not been given enough time to prepare for the event. "Instead of getting four hours or two days notice," Harkins complained, "we got approximately four minutes." Yet, once begun, the developments were reported in minute detail to Washington. By 6 November, it became clear that the generals had successfully ousted the old regime and installed a new government under the leadership of Gen. Minh and Tho. Predictably, advocates of the coup during the crisis emphasised positive features of the new regime. In his cable to President Kennedy on 6 November, Lodge insisted, the "prospects of victory are much improved, provided the generals stay united. [Robert] Thompson of the British advisory mission thinks that, in such an event, the war could be considerably shortened as compared with the period estimated during the Diem regime."¹⁰⁵ Referring to an interview with Minh on 12 November, Forrestal also told McGeorge Bundy that Minh "appears more politically sophisticated than some of us thought."¹⁰⁶

For Washington, the biggest problem immediately after the coup was the death of Diem and Nhu, which apparently came as a surprise to Kennedy.¹⁰⁷ Madame Nhu, who was in Europe at the time, issued a statement holding the U.S. government responsible for the deaths of her husband and brother-in-law, which she described as "cruel treachery" and "dirty crime." To contain the damage, the State Department instructed Lodge not to give "any suggestion that this is just the

¹⁰⁴ Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, Part 2, p. 201.

¹⁰⁵ Cable, Lodge to JFK (6 Nov 1963), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 17, "Nov. 1963: 4-6." See also: Cable, Saigon to State (3 Nov 1963), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 17, "Nov. 1963: 2-3."

¹⁰⁶ Memo, Forrestal to M Bundy (12 Nov 1963), JFKL, President's Office Files, Box 128A, "Vietnam, General, 1963," #14; FBIS, "Duong Van Minh Interview" (12 Nov 1963), JFKL, President's Office Files, Box 128A, "Vietnam, General, 1963," #14a.

¹⁰⁷ When he received the news at the middle of the NSC meeting on 2 November, according to General Taylor, "Kennedy leaped to his feet and rushed from the room with a look of shock and dismay on his face which I had never seen before. He had always insisted that Diem must never suffer more than exile." Taylor as quoted in Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, Part 2, p. 201.

sort of thing you have to expect in a coup.”¹⁰⁸

Meanwhile, senior CIA officers were aware of the possibility that the media criticism against its Saigon Station in September to October was having negative effects on the morale of its employees. In an Agency Newsletter of 6 November 1963 Lyman Kirkpatrick (the Executive Director of the CIA) addressed this issue and assured his staff that they could be “proud of what the Agency has done in South Vietnam,” calling the CAS’ performance as “first-rate.”¹⁰⁹ A month later, McCone tried to persuade President Johnson to recall Ambassador Lodge in order to protect the new chief of the Saigon station, Peer de Silva. At meetings with the President in late November, McCone noted that Johnson had “no tolerance whatsoever with bickering and quarreling [sic] of the type that has gone on in South Vietnam,”¹¹⁰ and speculated that the President was “obviously opposed to Lodge (his opposition goes back to conflicts in the Senate).”¹¹¹ When McCone met Johnson on 6 December and recommended de Silva as the next chief of the station, he argued that de Silva’s appointment was a good move only if Johnson was to remove Lodge. The President turned out to be reluctant, however, arguing that such decision “would have political repercussions and would be tantamount to a vote of no confidence in the military junta.” McCone insisted that Lodge would try to destroy de Silva if he opposed the new chief’s assignment or simply did not like him, adding that “Lodge was absolutely unconscionable in matters of this kind and he had resorted to trickery time and time again during the Eisenhower administration...he never failed to use the newspapers in order to expose an individual or block an action.” The President promised that he would exercise the full power of his office to keep Lodge in line, but decided not to recall him. “Lodge would remove himself and become a candidate for the Republican nomination for the Presidency,” Johnson predicted.¹¹²

By the time Lodge left the RVN in mid-1964 to join the Presidential campaign – as a supporter rather than a candidate – the negative consequences of the regime change had become undeniable. As the CIA predicted, Minh’s government was overthrown by another coup in late January 1964. The repeated

¹⁰⁸ Cable, State to Saigon (3 Nov 1963), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 17, “Nov. 1963: 2–3.” Hilsman actually used that justification. When Margaret Higgins said, “Congratulations, Roger. How does it feel to have blood on your hands?” Hilsman replied, “Oh, come on now, Maggie. Revolutions are tough. People get hurt.” As quoted in Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, Part 2, p. 202.

¹⁰⁹ CIA, Agency Newsletter (6 Nov 1963), NA, CREST 70-00211R000800010004-7.

¹¹⁰ Minutes of meeting on 24 Nov 1963 (taken by McCone), “South Vietnam Situation” (25 Nov 1963), NA, JFK Collection, CIA Miscellaneous Files, Box 5, “JFK-M-06 (F19).”

¹¹¹ Minutes of meeting on 29 November 1963 (taken by McCone)(29 Nov 1963), NA, JFK Collection, CIA Miscellaneous Files, Box 5, “JFK-M-06 (F19).”

¹¹² Minutes of meeting (taken by McCone), “Meeting with the President, 6 Dec 1963” (6 Dec 1963), NA, JFK Collection, CIA Miscellaneous Files, Box 5, “JFK-M-06 (F19).”

changes of regime disrupted the chain of command and further weakened the war effort in the countryside. Furthermore, the new regime under General Khanh soon faced mass protests as well as threats from within the military circle, leading to another political crisis in September 1964. It was not until mid-1965 that the GVN regained some stability under the dual leadership of Nguyen Cao Ky and Nguyen Van Thieu.

Chapter 5

Rejecting Alternatives, November 1963 - March 1964

For both Vietnam intelligence and Vietnam policy, the months following the regime change in November 1963 can be seen as another period of missed opportunities for radical reforms. In late to early 1964, there were attempts to address some weaknesses in reporting, but those efforts fell short of a radical review of intelligence-related problems. Despite those lukewarm efforts, intelligence products from November 1963 to February 1964 not only clarified the rapid deterioration of the situation in the countryside but also some of the most basic problems for the GVN. Those reports pointed to the need for either a diplomatic settlement or a radically new approach to the counterinsurgency. However, the U.S. government had, by the end of March 1963, largely rejected both of those options, and had started to consider the possibility of taking action against North Vietnam with the aim of stopping Hanoi's support for the NLF. It was against this backdrop that senior policymakers began to see infiltration as the primary problem for the GVN and the NSC officially accepted the domino theory as a basis of its Vietnam policy in March 1964, a decision which was endorsed at least implicitly by the CIA. Together those developments set the framework for the Vietnam policy during the rest of 1964.

1. Limits of intelligence reform

By the end of 1963, the need for intelligence reform had been widely acknowledged. As discussed in the previous chapters, the detrimental effects of intelligence deficiencies upon policymaking became obvious during the dispute at NSC meetings in September 1963. "As you are well aware," Forrestal later told McGeorge Bundy, "the great difficulties we had to live through last August and September resulted largely from a nearly complete breakdown of the Government's ability to get accurate assessments of the situation in the Vietnamese country-side."¹ In October, William Sullivan's report discussed some of the intelligence-related problems within the U.S. mission,² whereas the INR's Research Memorandum RFE-90 underscored problems in the MACV statistics.³

¹ Memo, Forrestal to M. Bundy, "Reporting on the Situation in South Vietnam" (8 Jan 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 7, #147a.

² Memo, Sullivan, "Divergent Attitudes in U.S. Official Community" (6 Oct 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 200A, "Vietnam, General, 10/6/63-10/14/63, Memos and Misc.," #6.

³ INR, RFE-90, "Statistics on the War Effort in South Vietnam Show Unfavorable Trends"

Soon afterward, the regime change in Saigon revealed the inaccuracy of the intelligence supplied by the Diem regime, leading the Pentagon to accept that its estimates, based extensively on the GVN's statistics, had been too optimistic.⁴ In December, those developments prompted Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and DCI John McCone to act "vigorously in our respective spheres" to address the "grave reporting weakness."⁵

For McNamara, one of the most pressing problems was poor intelligence coordination between the civilian and military parts of the U.S. mission.⁶ Based on Sullivan's aforementioned report and his own observations in Saigon in December 1963, the Secretary judged that the primary source of the problem was Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge. McNamara told the President that the ambassador had "virtually no official contact" with, and refused to show important cables to, Gen. Paul Harkins (the MACV commander). "My impression," McNamara added, "is that Lodge simply does not know how to conduct a coordinated administration. This has of course been stressed to him both by Dean Rusk and myself (and also by John McCone), and I do not think he is consciously rejecting our advice; he has just operated as a loner all his life and cannot readily change now."⁷ A possible solution, in McNamara's view, was the newly assigned deputy chief of the mission, David Nes, a soft-spoken 46-year-old diplomat who received widespread support across Washington when nominated for the post in December.⁸ This "highly competent team player," McNamara hoped, could constitute "what would in effect be an executive committee operating below the level of the Ambassador."⁹ This

(22 Oct 1963), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 4, "Vietnam, JCS Comments on RFE-90 on Unfavorable Trend of War Effort, 11/14/63," #2.

⁴ Memo, McNamara to the President, "Vietnam Situation" (21 Dec 1963), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 7, #130.

⁵ Memo, McNamara to the President, "Vietnam Situation" (21 Dec 1963), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 7, #130.

⁶ It is worth mentioning that within the MACV the effort to improve information sharing among military, paramilitary and non-military elements began in late 1963, following the two-day seminar in September sponsored by the MACV J-2. Cable, Saigon to State, "Monthly Wrap-up Report" (7 Nov 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 202, "Vietnam, General, 11/6/63-11/15/63, State Cables," #21.

⁷ Memo, McNamara to the President, "Vietnam Situation" (21 Dec. 1963), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 7, #130. For Lodge's lack of coordination skill, see also: Cable, CAS to CIA (16 Nov 1963), JFKL, President's Office Files, Country Files, Box 128A, "Vietnam, Security, 1963," #34; Memo, Forrestal to M Bundy, "Appendix to Memorandum on South Vietnam: Ambassador Lodge" (26 May 1964), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 24, "Southeast Asia, 1961-1966, Vietnam, General, 3/64-5/64."

⁸ Memo, Rusk to the President (9 Dec 1963), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 7, #131; Memo, "Biographic Data, Mr. David G. Nes" (n.d.), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 7, #131a; Memo, M. Bundy to the President, "Your meeting with David Nes at 12:15 p.m." (10 Dec 1963), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 7, #135; Memo, Taylor to the President (10 Dec 1963), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 7, #136.

⁹ Memo, McNamara to the President, "Vietnam Situation" (21 Dec 1963), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 7, #130.

was possibly the origin of the “Nes committee,” a regular meeting at the deputy level chaired by Nes and Gen. William C. Westmoreland (the deputy commander of the MACV).¹⁰ While the committee provided a valuable civilian-military channel, however, it was not until Lodge and Harkins were replaced by Gen. Taylor and Gen. Westmoreland respectively in mid-1964 that the relationship between the embassy and the MACV markedly improved.¹¹ Meanwhile in Washington, senior policymakers also tried to ameliorate the “deep-seated lack of confidence” between senior officers at the Pentagon and the Far Eastern office in the State Department through the transfer of William Bundy (the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs) to State’s top Far East post (the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs) in February, replacing Roger Hilsman.¹² By mid-1964, therefore, the tension between the State Department and the Pentagon had been reduced by moving Taylor and Bundy from the Pentagon to key posts in the State Department, expanding the Defense Department’s influence on Vietnam policy.

McCone’s primary concern was the distortion of intelligence by the GVN and the U.S. mission. He made at least two separate attempts to mitigate this problem. The first was the dispatch of sixteen CIA officers (“old Vietnamese hands”) to South Vietnam in January 1964 to conduct a survey across the country and to “spot check” the accuracy of data supplied by the GVN and the U.S. mission.¹³ This effort resulted in a series of reports in February, but had little long-term effect on the quality of intelligence.¹⁴ Secondly, according to Forrestal, the DCI also “made great effort...to get his people out of all except a few operations in South Vietnam” and to “put them back into the intelligence business.”

¹⁰ Memo, “Level of Coordination” (n.d.), LBJL, Westmoreland Papers, Box 1, Folder 4, #84. See also: Memo, W. Bundy to Nes (16 Jan 1964), LBJL, Westmoreland Papers, Box 1, Folder 4, #72.

¹¹ For the continuing dispute between the Embassy and the MACV, see: Cable, Lodge to Rusk (30 April 1964); Cable, Rusk to Lodge (7 May 1964); Cable, W Bundy to Lodge (8 May 1964), all in LBJL, NSF, Intelligence File, Box 9, “Vietnam: Rusk/Lodge/Wm. Bundy Corres.,” #3a, #2c and #2b.

¹² David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2000), p. 299

¹³ CIA “Spot Check on Counterinsurgency Reporting in Vietnam” (9 Jan 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 7, #148. Harold Ford argues that upon McNamara’s request the proposal became a joint CIA-Defense-State project. The record of Lodge’s briefing to McNamara, Taylor and McCone in March, however, suggested that the officers were sent to South Vietnam without extensive coordination with other departments. Ford, *CIA and Vietnam Policymakers*, pp. 44-45; Minute of meeting with McNamara, Taylor, Harkins, Sullivan, Westmoreland and McCone, (n.d.), NA, RG 84, Top Secret Foreign Service Post Files, Embassy, Saigon, 1964, Box 1, “Correspondence, 1964.”

¹⁴ Memo, CIA, “Initial Report of CAS Group Findings in South Vietnam” (10 Feb 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 2 [1 of 2], Folder 3, #109; Memo, CIA, “Further Comments by CAS on the Situation in Vietnam” (10 Feb 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 2 [1 of 2], Folder 3, #111a.

This separation of intelligence and covert operations was expected to reduce what Forrestal described as “the old problem of having people who are responsible for operations also responsible for evaluating the results.”¹⁵ Yet, despite support from Peer de Silva (the new chief of the CIA’s Saigon Station), this proposal had small chance of actually being followed through when many in the Station continued to see their covert projects as an important part of the counterinsurgency. Following the “sobering revelations of GVN weaknesses” after the November coup, as Thomas Ahern (a CAS officer) later recalled, the Station’s “post-Diem agenda reflected the desperate need to do something, anything, to stem the Communist tide more than it did any rigorous analysis of the reasons for VC successes.”¹⁶ McCone himself had come to support an increase in the CAS’s covert projects by June 1964.¹⁷

During February and March 1964, there were also efforts among mid-ranking officers, including Chester Cooper (CIA), Col. Gillis (DIA) and Louis Sarris (INR), to improve technical aspects of intelligence assessments. “We are currently undertaking comprehensive examination of reporting requirements of all Washington intelligence and policy elements concerned with developments in Vietnam,” the State Department told the Saigon Embassy on 20 February.¹⁸ In March, those discussions resulted in a series of recommendations to the U.S. mission (including the introduction of a joint weekly report from Saigon and the creation of provincial intelligence units) and formed a foundation of the Weekly Report in Washington.¹⁹ During the rest of the year, discussions on technical issues continued,²⁰ but many weaknesses remained largely unchanged. Basic intelligence capabilities were still inadequate to cover diverse subjects pertinent to Vietnam policy, especially those concerning the NLF. Intelligence traffic continued to be dominated by fragmented reports of the latest developments, while the

¹⁵ Memo, Forrestal to M. Bundy “Reporting on the Situation in South Vietnam” (8 Jan 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 7, #147a.

¹⁶ Ahern, *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam*, p. 133.

¹⁷ See the documents in NA, CREST, 80B01676R001400040027-6, which include: Memo, McCone to Carter (26 June 1964); Memo, Carter to Taylor, “CIA Operations in Vietnam” (1 July 1964); Letter, Carter to Taylor (2 July 1964); Cable, CIA to CAS (2 July 1964).

¹⁸ Cable, State to Saigon, “Reporting on the War” (20 Feb 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 2 [1 of 2], Folder 4, #10.

¹⁹ Memo, Whiting to Mendenhall, “Intelligence Reporting from South Vietnam,” (5 Feb 1964); Memo, Cooper to Sullivan, “Washington Requirements for Reporting on the War in South Vietnam” (24 Feb 1964); Memo, W. Bundy to Cooper (25 Feb 1964); Memo, Cooper to Sullivan, “Washington Requirements for Reporting on the War in South Vietnam (as revised, 25 Feb 64),” (26 Feb 1964); Memo, Cooper to Sullivan, “Recommendations on Intelligence Reporting” (27 March 1964), all five documents acquired through FOIA requests. Cable, State to Saigon (joint State-Defense-AID-CIA message)(30 March 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 3 [1 of 2], Folder 4, #135.

²⁰ Memo, Wilson, “Criteria for Determining Completion of New Life Hamlets” (18 May 1964), LBJL, Westmoreland Papers, Box 2, Folder 4, #87, 88 and 89.

understanding of the socio-political background of the conflict remained weak in many organisations. On top of this, the lack of strategic consensus, together with the absence of an effective interdepartmental mechanism for intelligence coordination, continued to limit the government's ability to interpret and analyse different aspects of the conflict in a reasonably comprehensive manner.²¹

These tentative efforts in early 1964, in short, failed to address many of the key problems which would have required thorough, interdepartmental inquiries. Yet McNamara, McCone and other senior policymakers possibly felt that such a move was politically impossible,²² for it could highlight the mistakes of some organisations (including the JCS) in the previous two years and reignite bureaucratic bickering and quarrelling, for which President Johnson had "no tolerance whatsoever."²³ This political problem, which the intelligence dispute in 1963 had intensified, might also be a part of explanation why the U.S. government never conducted a major, interdepartmental review of its Vietnam intelligence during the following decade despite McNamara's declining confidence in the intelligence products supplied by his own department and the disputes between the JCS and the CIA over the Order of Battle statistics in the late 1960s.²⁴

2. Negative trend and its causes (November 1963 - February 1964)

Washington's view on the new regime in Saigon appeared to remain relatively positive throughout November 1963. Just after the death of Diem, President Kennedy emphasised that the United States had to help the new leaders to rebuild the country,²⁵ and his successor, President Johnson, was equally anxious not to

²¹ In December McNamara and McCone did acknowledge this problem, accepting that Washington had yet to find a proper "reporting system that would provide all agencies an accurate gauge of what progress has been made, of where we stand, and a satisfactory basis for deciding what must be done in Vietnam." Memo, W. Bundy to Nes (16 Jan 1964), LBJL, Westmoreland Papers, Box 1, Folder 4, #72. For attempts to develop a list of "yardsticks for progress," see: Memo, Cooper to Sullivan, "Recommendations on Intelligence Reporting" (27 March 1964), acquired through FOIA requests.

²² On 8 January 1964, for instance, Forrestal told McGeorge Bundy that the sharp increase in CAS's intelligence capability would be difficult for McNamara to accept, since "to do so is an implied criticism of the Saigon command and its uniformed counterpart in Washington. If John [McCone] is discreet enough and if his efforts are very low key, McNamara's problem will be reduced." Memo, Forrestal to M. Bundy, "Reporting on the Situation in South Vietnam" (8 Jan 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 7, #147a.

²³ Minutes of meeting with the President on 24 November 1963 (taken by McCone) "South Vietnam Situation" (25 Nov 1963), NA, JFK Collection, CIA Miscellaneous Files, Box 5, "JFK-M-06 (F19)."

²⁴ For the dispute in late 1960s, see for example: Ford, *CIA and Vietnam Policymakers*, Episode 3; Adams, *War of Numbers*.

²⁵ Kenney told Lodge on 6 November that "we necessarily faced and accepted the possibility that our position might encourage a change of government. We thus have a responsibility to help this new government to be effective in every way that we can."

send any sign of a “vote of no confidence in the military junta.”²⁶ While these signals by the White House might well have discouraged negative comments by the coup’s opponents, advocates of the regime change stressed the good prospects for Gen. Minh’s government. At the NSC meeting on 24 November, according to McCone, Lodge told Johnson that “everybody was very happy after the coup” (showing pictures of the crowds in Saigon to back up this claim) and “left the President with the impression that we are on the road to victory.”²⁷ In this context, the CIA remained a major exception. Since mid-November, its Saigon Station, then under the leadership of acting chief David Smith, dispatched a series of critical assessments, identifying emerging problems in the new regime.²⁸ This, together perhaps with his anger at Lodge’s behaviour during the 1963 crisis, led McCone to challenge the Ambassador at the aforementioned NSC meeting on 24 November. Telling the President that the CIA’s estimate of the situation was “somewhat more serious,” McCone said that the Agency could not give a “particularly optimistic appraisal of the future.”²⁹

During the following months, doubts about the GVN spread into other departments. While reports on progress did continue, negative information dominated the cables from Saigon, the in-depth analyses by the intelligence community and the briefings to McNamara and McCone during their joint visit to Saigon in December 1963.

As to the war efforts in the countryside, the evidence had become clear enough by early 1964 to conclude that the situation in the southern part of the country – the provinces around Saigon and in the Delta – had been deteriorating since mid-1963 “to a far greater extent than we realized because of our undue dependence on distorted Vietnamese reporting,” although the condition in the

Kenney as quoted in Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, Part 2, p. 204.

²⁶ Memo, McCone, “Meeting with the President, 6 Dec 1963” (6 Dec 1963), NA, JFK Collection, CIA Miscellaneous Files, Box 5, “JFK-M-06 (F19).”

²⁷ Memo for the record, McCone, “South Vietnam Situation” [meeting with the President on 24 November 1963] (25 Nov 1963), NA, JFK Collection, CIA Miscellaneous Files, Box 5, “JFK-M-06 (F19).” During a meeting with Roger Hilsman on the same day, Lodge also “cited several intelligence reports to indicate that the North Vietnamese might be considering a way out of the war in South Viet-Nam.” Memcon, Hilsman with Lodge (24 Nov 1963), JFKL, Hilsman Papers, Box 4, “Vietnam, 11/63,” #7a.

²⁸ See for example: Cable, CAS to CIA (14 Nov 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 202, “Vietnam, General, 11/6/63–11/15/63, CIA Reports,” #19; Cable, CAS to CIA, “Situation Appraisal as of 16 Nov 1963” (16 Nov 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 202, “Vietnam, General, 11/16/63–11/22/63, Memos and Misc.” #1; Cable, CAS to CIA, “Weekly Intelligence Highlights” (16 Nov 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 202, “Vietnam, General, 11/16/63–11/22/63, Memos and Misc.” #1a.

²⁹ Minutes of meeting with the President on 24 November 1963 (taken by McCone) “South Vietnam Situation” (25 Nov 1963), NA, JFK Collection, CIA Miscellaneous Files, Box 5, “JFK-M-06 (F19).”

northern and central regions remained less critical.³⁰ The number of completed Strategic Hamlets turned out to be far smaller than the previous regime had claimed.³¹ After the November coup, furthermore, the NLF's offensives across the country had caused a "substantial toll of friendly personnel and weapons."³² As for the GVN, purely military operations by the ARVN continued, but Diem's pacification programs had "virtually ground to a halt."³³ Many projects of the previous regime, including the Strategic Hamlet programme, were suspended or abandoned because of their weaknesses, their close association with the Ngo family,³⁴ and/or the disruption caused by the replacement of district and provincial chiefs appointed by the Ngos. A "vacuum created by the abrupt disappearance of the highly authoritarian and personalized Ngo family rule" proved "enormous." In particular, the fall of Nhu's grass-roots political organisations (including the Republican Youth Movement, the Can Lao party and the secret police) diminished the government's contact with, and control over, the local population. Deprived of those mass platforms, the GVN's ability to rally popular support through its local administrators was limited, as the opulent lifestyle of the GVN officers in the provinces had "created a wide gulf between the government and the people."³⁵ Furthermore, there were some indications of the "apathy among the population at large and waning enthusiasm among the military," especially in the paramilitary forces. The rural community was reportedly "without enthusiasm either for the GVN or the VC sides but responsive to the latter" because it feared the NLF or it

³⁰ Memo, McNamara to the President "Vietnam Situation" (21 Dec 1963), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 7, #130. For statistical comparisons of the GVN and the VC's weapons losses and casualties, see: CIA/OCI, Special Report, "Trend of Communist Insurgency in South Vietnam" (17 Jan 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 48, Folder 1, #21. Mark Moyar, however, argues that the negative trend during 1963 was exaggerated by the junta members in Minh's regime to justify their action against Diem and Nhu. Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, chapter 15.

³¹ For example, Forrestal told the President that out of 219 strategic hamlets in the Long An province that the Palace had reported to be completed, only 45 had actually been identified. Memo, Forrestal to the President, "Vietnam" (11 Dec 1963) LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 3, #84. It is worth noting that in mid-January 1964 Lodge reported, "In Sept 1963, the then province chief [of Long An province] said he controlled only 10 percent of the 200 strategic hamlets, whereas the Viet Cong controlled the remainder." Cable, Saigon to State, (15 Jan 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 5, #74. Similarly, as to the Phuoc Thanh province, the CIA's "old Vietnam hand" reported, "Of 41 strategic hamlets approved for the province, only four had been completed by 7 February. Three hamlets were considered populated and controlled by the VC." Memo, CIA/CAS, "Initial Report of CAS Group Findings in South Vietnam" (10 Feb 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 2 (1 of 2), Folder 3, #109.

³² Cable, CAS to CIA, "Weekly Intelligence Highlights" (16 Nov 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 202, "Vietnam, General, 11/16/63-11/22/63, Memos and Misc.," #1a.

³³ CIA/OCI, Special Report, "Trend of Communist Insurgency in South Vietnam" (17 Jan 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 48, Folder 1, #21.

³⁴ Ahern, *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam*, p. 132.

³⁵ Memo, Jorden to Harriman, "Situation in Viet Nam: Report of a Conversation with Col. Pham Ngoc Thao" (3 Feb 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 2 [1 of 2], Folder 3, #105.

was susceptible to NLF propaganda regarding peace and neutralism. The paramilitary forces were “unpaid and essentially unmotivated, and had little confidence in the ability of the ARVN to reinforce or support.”³⁶

Political weaknesses of the junta-led government in Saigon became increasingly obvious as well. The rivalry among the leading generals was one of the key issues discussed in intelligence products since November. The CAS, for example, reported on 16 November that Gen. Dinh (the Second Vice Chairman of the Military Executive Committee), Gen. Oai (the Minister of Information) and Gen. Xuan (the Director of the National Police) were emerging as “three possible sources of irritation” in the GVN.³⁷ Yet, it was the second coup by Gen. Khanh on 29 January that exposed the full extent of the power struggle within the GVN and allowed the U.S. government to identify some causes of political instability (notably dissatisfaction with Minh’s leadership within the army, the ambitious character of key generals, and the tensions between the allegedly pro-French and neutralist generals who occupied key posts in Minh’s government and the anti-French officers close to Khanh).³⁸ The prospects of the new regime remained uncertain. On the one hand, the fact that Khanh had assembled a relatively inclusive government (which not only retained Gen. Minh as the titular head of state but also embraced representatives of all three major geographic regions and some non-communist political factions) was largely welcomed by the State Department and the CIA.³⁹ On the other hand, Col. Pham Ngoc Thao (a participant in the November coup who was also a VC agent) and the CIA’s “old Vietnam hands” (who were in South Vietnam when the January coup took place) stressed at least three major problems for the new regime: the “volatile, exceedingly ambitious and dictatorial” character of Gen. Khanh, which could heighten the fear of

³⁶ Memo, CIA to M. Bundy “Appraisal of the Conduct of the War in Vietnam” (10 Feb 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 2 [1 of 2], Folder 3, #110; Memo, CIA “Further Comments by CAS on the Situation in Vietnam” (10 Feb 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 2 [1 of 2], Folder 3, #111a, 111b.

³⁷ Cable, CAS to CIA, “Situation Appraisal as of 16 Nov 1963” (16 Nov 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 202, “Vietnam, General, 11/16/63–11/22/63, Memos and Misc.,” #1. For the internal power struggle in the GVN, see also: CIA, Memorandum, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (6 Nov 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 202, “Vietnam, General, 11/6/63–11/15/63, CIA Reports,” #1; Cable, CAS to CIA, “Situation Appraisal as of 7 Dec 1963” (7 Dec 1963) JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 17, “Dec. 1963: 6–7”; Cable, CAS to CIA, “Situation Appraisal as of 14 Dec 1963” (16 Dec 1963) JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 18, “Dec. 1963: 9–16.”

³⁸ INR, Intelligence Note, “The Coup in Saigon” (29 Jan 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 2 [1 of 2], Folder 3, #98; Memo, Forrestal to the President, “Vietnam” (30 Jan 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 2 [1 of 2], Folder 3, #100.

³⁹ CIA, Intelligence Memorandum “Preliminary Appraisal of New South Vietnamese Cabinet” (11 Feb 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 2 [1 of 2], Folder 3, #113; Memo, Mendenhall to Hilsman, “New Government in Viet-Nam” (13 Feb 1964), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 24, “Southeast Asia, 1961–1966, Vietnam, General, 1/64–2/64.”

dictatorship among civilians as well as in the military; the negative popular response to Khanh's action against Minh, who was known to be "much better liked than Khanh"; and the possibility that Khanh's move had lowered the hurdles against future coups d'état.⁴⁰ It is not surprising, therefore, that, even though the Khanh's regime remained relatively stable from mid-February to early May, McNamara's post-trip report in March 1963 recognised its "uncertain viability," pointing out a "constant threat of assassination or of another coup, which would drop morale and organization nearly to zero."⁴¹

Meanwhile, the CIA's Special Report "Trend of Communist Insurgency in South Vietnam" (17 January 1964) provided a fine analysis of the strength of the NLF.⁴² The report admitted that, despite some progress during 1963,⁴³ information on the NLF's political activities remained "meager,"⁴⁴ and it could not give details on some aspects of the NLF, such as their presence in the GVN.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the report could show that during 1963 the NLF's capabilities had increased sharply and its operations had become more elaborate. After outlining a "marked

⁴⁰ Thao suggested that coups might become "a national pastime, with every disgruntled element plotting forceful change," while the CIA team also argued, "Perhaps most disturbing implication of the Khanh's coup is the eye opener it must have provided to unit commanders as to the relative ease with which the regime could be overthrown" Memo, Jorden to Harriman, "Situation in Viet Nam: Report of a Conversation with Col. Pham Ngoc Thao" (3 Feb 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 2 [1 of 2], Folder 3, #105; Memo, CIA, "Initial Report of CAS Group Findings in South Vietnam" (10 Feb 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 2 [1 of 2], Folder 3, #109; Memo, CIA, "Further Comments by CAS on the Situation in Vietnam" (10 Feb 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 2 [1 of 2], Folder 3, #111ab

⁴¹ Post-Trip Report, McNamara to the President, "South Vietnam" (16 March 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 3, "McNaughton, VII, National Archive (1)," #8. McCone registered a dissent footnote, arguing that the risk of another coup was not "as serious as he believes this paragraph implies."

⁴² CIA/OCI, Special Report, "Trend of Communist Insurgency in South Vietnam" (17 Jan 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 48, "Southeast Asia, Special Intelligence Material, Vol. I, 12/63-7/64," #21.

⁴³ Memo, CIA to McCone, "Viet Cong Quasi-Governmental Activities" (29 Nov 1963), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 17, "Dec. 1963: 1-5"; DIA, "Improved VC Combat Effectiveness and Insurgency Posture" (24 Dec 1963), NA, RG 218, Records of Gen. Maxwell Taylor, Box 12, "091 Vietnam (Nov 63-Feb 64) (1 of 2)."

⁴⁴ The report, nevertheless, speculated that the NLF was carrying out political campaigns using various organizations such as the "Liberation Youth" movement, peasant associations, women's leagues, and guerrilla veterans' groups.

⁴⁵ This is not to say that the Agency was not aware of the problems. Kirkpatrick, for instance, pointed out in February, "It is evident that a major factor in VC victories is their superior intelligence based on nation-wide penetrations and intimidation at all levels. This is also a factor in their military victories where internal agents turn guns on defenders." Memo, CIA to M. Bundy "Appraisal of the Conduct of the War in Vietnam" (10 Feb 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 2 [1 of 2], Folder 3, #110. Nonetheless, the Agency was probably unaware at the time that the new Deputy Director of National Police, Tran Ba Thanh, who the CIA later suspected to be a VC agent, "released some key Viet Cong prisoners, destroyed Viet Cong dossiers in police archives, and placed at least one known Viet Cong agent in a key position within the police structure," jeopardising the GVN's grasp of the VC apparatus in the capital area, which was fairly robust during the closing days of the Diem regime. SNIE 53-2-64, "The Situation in South Vietnam" (1 Oct 1964), the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.coa.gov> accessed 4 February 2007.

growth in the organizational strength and firepower,” the report stressed that, in response to the difficulties caused by the surge of U.S. military assistance in 1962, insurgents had developed new policies and programs geared to a “long and arduous struggle.” Their military campaigns were now directed almost exclusively against “soft targets such as strategic hamlets and small outposts manned by paramilitary forces.” On the political and psychological fronts, they sought to gain the support of the masses through their own civic action programmes and a range of propaganda activities (such as meetings, demonstrations and “whispering campaigns”). The report also suggested that the NLF was carrying out “on a massive scale” a proselytizing programme against the officers working in the ARVN and paramilitary units (and their dependents), using a combination of persuasion and selective use of violence. Overall, the report highlighted the insurgents’ “resourcefulness, adaptability, and determination which has characterized their nearly continuous involvement in guerrilla fighting since 1945.” In so doing, it sent a clear warning that the prospects for the conflict were for a “prolonged contest of attrition, endurance, will, and morale.”⁴⁶

Given all those reports, it was almost inevitable that policymakers recognised the situation as critical. In late December, McNamara told the President that the situation was “very disturbing,” adding that “Current trends, unless reversed in the next 2-3 months, will lead to neutralization at best and more likely to a Communist-controlled state.”⁴⁷ In February McCone told Secretary of State Dean Rusk that “the situation was most serious...There was no evidence of Country Team operation and increased evidence of Viet Cong activities and victories.”⁴⁸

At around the same time, the call for a diplomatic solution became rounder and more widespread. In late 1963, the French government stepped up its effort to pressure the White House to accept an international conference on the RVN,⁴⁹

⁴⁶ CIA/OCI, Special Report, “Trend of Communist Insurgency in South Vietnam” (17 Jan 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 48, “Southeast Asia, Special Intelligence Material, Vol. I, 12/63–7/64,” #21

⁴⁷ Memo, McNamara to the President, “Vietnam Situation” (21 Dec 1963), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 7, #130.

⁴⁸ Memo, McCone, “Discussion with Secretary Rusk at Luncheon, 6 Feb [1964],” (6 Feb 1964) NA, JFK Collection, CIA Miscellaneous Files, Box 5. “JFK-M-06 (F10).” Around the same time, Lyman Kirkpatrick, a CIA officer who appeared to be in South Vietnam in early February, also reported “I have been shocked by the number of our (CIA) people and of the military, even those whose job is always to say we are winning, who feel that the tide is against us.” Memo, CIA to M. Bundy, “Appraisal of the Conduct of the War in Vietnam” (10 Feb 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 2 [1 of 2], Folder 3, #110.

⁴⁹ Memo, Forrestal to M. Bundy, “Conversation with Ambassador Alphand” (14 Nov 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 202, “Vietnam, General, 11/6/63–11/15/63, Memos and Misc.,” #12; Cable, [possibly CIA Paris] to CIA, “French Views on the Situation in Southeast Asia” (26 Feb 1964), LBJL, DSDUF, Box 1. “NSF, Intelligence Briefing, Box 3,

whereas the *New York Times* intensified its campaign for a negotiated settlement, criticising the “let’s get back to the war” spirit in Washington.⁵⁰ Arguably the most clear-sighted – and rather prophetic – at this point was Senator Mike Mansfield, a close observer of the Vietnam conflict since the 1950s. In his memo to the President on 1 February, the Senator argued:

This process of coup upon coup may be expected to be increasingly divorced from any real concern with the needs of the Vietnamese people. If the people do not go over actively to the Viet Cong, they will at best care very little about resisting them, let alone crusading against them. Indeed, the bulk of the Vietnamese people, as well as the lower ranks of the armed forces, may already be in this frame of mind. If there are in fact the grim prospects, our present policies will be drained of any constructive significance for the political future of Viet Nam. We will find ourselves engaged merely in an indecisive, bloody and costly military involvement and the involvement will probably have to increase just to keep the situation as it is...A deeper military plunge is not a real alternative. Apart from the absence of sufficient national interest to justify it to our own people, there is no reason to assume that it will settle the question. More likely than not, it will simply enlarge the morass in which we are now already on the verge of indefinite entrapment. Indeed, the morass could conceivably be enlarged all the way into North Viet Nam, into Laos, into Cambodia and into China without changing the basic pattern of the difficulty for us.”⁵¹

Analysts in the CIA’s Office of National Estimates (ONE) also implied the need for Washington to consider the possibility of a diplomatic solution. A 45-page memo on 19 January written by Willard Matthias (a ONE analysts), which was later leaked to the U.S. press in the middle of the presidential campaign in August 1964, expressed his “serious doubt that victory can be won.” While accepting that “at least a prolonged stalemate can be attained,” the memo suggested that certain developments “could lead to some kind of negotiated settlement based upon neutralization.”⁵² Matthias’ colleague at the ONE, Chester Cooper, also sent a memo to Walt Rostow (the chairman of the State Department’s Policy Planning Council) on 7 February, warning:

‘President’s Intelligence Checklist, 2/25/64–3/5/6.’”

⁵⁰ Memo, Forrestal to M Bundy (7 Nov 1963) JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 202, “Vietnam, General, 11/6/63–11/15/63, Memos and Misc.,” #3. For *New York Times*’ criticism, see also: Memo, Mendenhall (12 Nov 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 202, “Vietnam, General, 11/6/63–11/15/63, Memos and Misc.,” #10a; Memo, Forrestal to M Bundy (13 Nov 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 202, “Vietnam, General, 11/6/63–11/15/63, Memos and Misc.,” #11; *New York Times* editorial (8 Dec 1963), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 2, #60, 68.

⁵¹ Memo, Mansfield to the President, “The Vietnamese Situation” (1 Feb 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 7, #127.

⁵² Memo for Director of Security (CIA) “Publication of Paper Written by William Matthias, Board of National Estimates” (26 Aug 1964), and ten newspaper articles in August 1964 reporting Matthias’ paper, all in NA, CREST 84-00780R000600210017-7.

I feel that attention should be given to planning against what I would describe as 'the worst case'...our planning vis-à-vis Southeast Asia concentrates on how we accomplish our objectives there...But, suppose, despite our best laid plans and our heroic effort, things go sour – and there are plenty of things beyond our control that could go sour. Who is planning what we can salvage if we are forced to negotiate out of South Vietnam?⁵³

3. Rejecting a diplomatic settlement and a new strategy (March 1964)

Despite all this, the U.S. government rejected the possibility of a diplomatic solution and the need for a radical overhaul of the counterinsurgency strategy. Instead, policymaking in March 1964, which was centred upon the McNamara-McCone trip to Saigon, largely focused on relatively minor technical issues, apparently on the assumption that small changes could reverse the tide of the conflict. During his meeting with McNamara's team, for instance, Lodge insisted:

[T]he present rather apathetic state of opinion in the country can change overnight...I have seen so many political campaigns where everything looks awful. Then you try this and you try that and a couple of things begin to go; all of a sudden, people's way of looking at things change and I believe that that could happen here.⁵⁴

At the same time, the Pentagon continued to believe that "the military tools and concepts of the GVN/US effort are generally sound and adequate,"⁵⁵ and concentrated on areas in which improvement appeared to be possible (such as the reorganisation of paramilitary forces, the introduction of additional military equipment, and the creation of offensive guerrilla units). Listing those proposals, McNamara reported to the President on 16 March that "If the Khanh Government can stay in power and the above actions can be carried out rapidly, it is my judgment that the situation in South Vietnam can be significantly improved in the next four to six months."⁵⁶ This focus on relatively minor technical issues obscured more basic problems identified in intelligence products in early 1964, such as the peasant apathy toward the government, the low morale among

⁵³ Memo, Cooper to Rostow (7 Feb 1964), LBJL, NSF, Agency File, Box 8, Folder 6, #67b.

⁵⁴ Minute of meeting with McNamara, Taylor, Harkins, Sullivan, Westmoreland and McCone, (n.d.), NA, RG 84, Top Secret Foreign Service Post Files, Embassy, Saigon, 1964, Box 1, "Correspondence, 1964."

⁵⁵ McNamara Post-Trip Report, "South Vietnam" (16 March 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 3, Folder 5, #8.

⁵⁶ McNamara Post-Trip Report, "South Vietnam" (16 March 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 3, Folder 5, #8.

paramilitary forces, and the skill and determination of the NLF.

The growing attention to enemy infiltration also took attention away from those fundamental problems within the RVN. Until early 1964, the North Vietnamese support for the NLF was not regarded as a primary problem for the GVN. In January 1964 the CIA's Special Report mentioned earlier pointed out that "relying only in part on infiltration from the North, the Viet Cong levy replacements from local guerrilla units," even though the report also noted that trained officers and heavy weapons from North Vietnam had played a crucial role in the development of VC capabilities.⁵⁷ More important was McNamara's report to the President in December 1963, which concluded that "In general, the infiltration problem, while serious and annoying, is a lower priority" compared to weaknesses in the GVN/US operations.⁵⁸ Around February and March 1964, however, senior policymakers began to emphasise infiltration as a primary problem for the GVN. Lyman Kirkpatrick (CIA), for example, argued on 10 February that "with the Laos and Cambodia borders open, its entire pacification effort is like trying to mop the floor before turning off the faucet."⁵⁹ A month later, during a meeting with McNamara's team, Lodge insisted that "North Viet-Nam, with Red China goading it on, is stepping up the flow of men and materials into South Viet-Nam." This led to the argument in McNamara's post-trip report in March 1964 that "North Vietnamese support, always significant, has been increasing."⁶⁰ McCone supported this view, arguing that the GVN/U.S. program "can never be considered completely satisfactory" so long as it permitted an "uninterrupted and unmolested" supply from North Vietnam.⁶¹

This marked change in policymakers' view on the importance of infiltration can partly be explained by a series of reports on large enemy units with better equipment, which was thought to be impossible without support from the DRV.⁶² The growing attention to the external support for the NLF can also be attributed to

⁵⁷ The CIA estimated that only 1,000–1,500 cadres were infiltrated from the North during the first nine months of 1963, while its estimates at the beginning of 1964 on the number of VC regular and irregular forces stood at 23,000–25,000 and 60,000–80,000 respectively. CIA/OCI, Special Report, "Trend of Communist Insurgency in South Vietnam" (17 Jan 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 48, "Southeast Asia, Special Intelligence Material, Vol. I, 12/63–7/64," #21.

⁵⁸ Memo, McNamara to the President, "Vietnam Situation" (21 Dec 1963), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 7, #130.

⁵⁹ Memo, CIA to M. Bundy "Appraisal of the Conduct of the War in Vietnam" (10 Feb 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 2 [1 of 2], Folder 3, #110.

⁶⁰ McNamara, Post-trip report, McNamara to the President, "South Vietnam" (16 March 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 3, Folder 5, #8.

⁶¹ McNamara, Post-trip report, McNamara to the President, "South Vietnam" (16 March 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 3, Folder 5, #8.

⁶² See for instance: Memo, CIA "Further Comments by CAS on the Situation in Vietnam" (10 Feb 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 2 [1 of 2], Folder 3, #111b.

the fact that in late 1963 to early 1964 some policymakers, notably Lodge and Walt Rostow (State Department) began to consider the possibility of military action against North Vietnam.⁶³ For McNamara, though, the primary reason for emphasising infiltration seemed to be the need to justify the ongoing U.S. support for the GVN. At a meeting in Saigon in March 1964, McNamara insisted on taking a sample or two of Chinese-made weapons back to Washington, explaining:

I want to get off the plane in Washington with members of our party carrying a recoilless rifle and a heavy machine gun...If this nation is going to be dedicated to support of South Viet-Nam, we are going to have to convince Americans more than we already have of Chicom involvement in this war, and I just want to have it there where the TV cameras can take pictures of it.⁶⁴

Presumably for the same reason, McNamara's post-trip report listed Chinese-made equipment found in the RVN, such as 75 mm recoilless rifles and 90 mm rocket launchers.⁶⁵

Underlying all this, as always, was the domino theory: the prediction of a domino-like effect in the event of the U.S. withdrawal from the RVN. At first, President Johnson appeared to be unsure about that possibility. In January he asked his senior policymakers to provide their comments on Mansfield's memos to the President of 7 December and 6 January, both of which called for a negotiated settlement.⁶⁶ The response by Rusk, McNamara and McGeorge Bundy all confirmed the existing belief that a neutral South Vietnam would soon become a communist-dominated state, and that the consequences of a communist takeover of the RVN would be "extremely serious both for the rest of Southeast Asia and for the U.S. position in the rest of Asia and indeed in other key areas of the world."⁶⁷ McNamara's post-visit report on 16 March repeated this consensus, arguing that

⁶³ Memorandum of Conversation, Harriman with Lodge, "North Vietnam" (24 Nov 1963), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 2, #73b; Memo, Rostow to Rusk, "Southeast Asia and China" (10 Jan 1964), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 24, "Southeast Asia, 1961-1966, Vietnam: General, 1/64 - 2/64"; John Prados, *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), p. 71; Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, p. 51.

⁶⁴ Minute of Meeting, with McNamara, Taylor, Harkins, Sullivan, Westmoreland, McCone, (n.d.), NA, RG 84, Top Secret Foreign Service Post Files, Embassy, Saigon, 1964, Box 1, "Correspondence, 1964."

⁶⁵ McNamara, Post-trip report, McNamara to the President, "South Vietnam" (16 March 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 3, Folder 5, #8.

⁶⁶ Memo, Mansfield to Johnson, "Southeast Asia and Viet Nam" (7 Dec 1963); Memo, Mansfield to Johnson, "Viet Nameese Situation" (6 Jan 1964), both documents in LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 7, #127f-g.

⁶⁷ The quotation is from McNamara's memo to Johnson. Memo, McNamara to Johnson, "Comment on Memoranda by Senator Mansfield" (7 Jan 1964); Memo, Rusk to Johnson, "Viet-Nam" (8 Jan 1964); Memo, M. Bundy to Johnson, "Senator Mansfield's Views on South Vietnam" (6 Jan 1964), all three documents in LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 7, #127c-e.

negotiation on the basis of neutralisation would “simply mean a Communist take-over in South Vietnam.”⁶⁸ On the next day (17 March), the NSC officially accepted the domino theory as a basis of the Vietnam policy.

4. The domino theory and the CIA (1964)

The CIA/ONE's endorsement of the domino theory

There have been two conflicting interpretations of the CIA's view on the domino theory, especially with regard to its memo on 9 June 1964 (“Would the Loss of South Vietnam and Laos Precipitate a ‘Domino Effect’ in the Far East?”) produced by the Agency's Bureau of National Estimates (BNE) upon request from President Johnson. In his memoir *In Retrospect* (1995), McNamara argues that this document reinforced the administration's fear that the “West's containment policy lay at serious risk in Vietnam. And thus we continued our slide down the slippery slope.”⁶⁹ This interpretation is challenged by Harold Ford (a former ONE analyst who played an important role in Vietnam intelligence in 1964) in his book *CIA and Vietnam Policymakers* (1998). In the section titled “The Domino Theory Questioned,” Ford insists that the same BNE memo in June 1964 actually dismissed the domino theory and that the memo's conclusion was simply ignored by policymakers. The problems, according to Ford, were that the “CIA had not been asked for its view of the domino thesis until 10 weeks *after* the NSC had already inscribed it as formal US policy” in March 1964, and that the Agency's view had “no apparent impact on existing or subsequent policy.”⁷⁰

Ford's argument is misleading at least on two important respects. Firstly, although policymakers might not ask the CIA's view on the domino theory in early 1964, the Agency's documents in that period not only discussed the policy implications of the instability in Southeast Asia but also reinforced the domino metaphor by emphasising threats to the U.S. national security. SNIE 50-64 “Short-term Prospects in Southeast Asia” (12 February 1964), for example, stressed that “The struggle for South Vietnam will be a test, crucial for much of Southeast Asia, of US ability and will to preserve and protect anti-Communist regime in the area – and, hence, of the feasibility of going along with the US response to Communist pressures rather than of opting for some other course such

⁶⁸ McNamara, Post-Trip Report, “South Vietnam” (16 March 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 3, Folder 5, #8.

⁶⁹ McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p. 125.

⁷⁰ Emphasis in original. Ford, *CIA and Vietnam Policymakers*, p. 56. For the same interpretation, see: John Ranelagh, *CIA: A History* (London: BBC Books, 1992), p. 117.

as an attempt to negotiate liable settlements with the Communists.”⁷¹ This was followed three months later by the CIA memorandum “The Situation in Southeast Asia” (18 May 1964), which argued that “The year 1964 is likely to be critical in this battle for control of Southeast Asia. The regime in Vientiane is in a shambles; the government in Saigon...is confronting great odds...the US may, by the year end, be unable to rally effectively the friendly forces necessary to preserve the Western position in Mainland Southeast Asia.”⁷² These strong and repeated warnings by the intelligence community in early 1964 can be seen as a part of the reason why the NSC faced little, if any, opposition when and after it officially made the domino theory a basis of its Vietnam policy on 17 March 1964.

It seems impossible, secondly, to describe the aforementioned BNE memo on 9 June 1964 as a challenge to the domino theory. On the opening page, as Ford points out, the memo did question the possibility of the “rapid, successive communization of the other states of the Far East” with the possible exception of Cambodia. However, as McNamara points out, the BNE then used the following four pages to emphasise other forms of “domino” effects as if they were almost unavoidable:

Failure [in South Vietnam] would be damaging to US prestige, and would seriously debase the credibility of US will and capability to contain the spread of communism elsewhere in the areas...Thailand would almost certainly shift toward a neutralist position, hoping thus to forestall any vigorous Communist move against the regime...Ne Win [of Burma] would see the ouster of the US from Indochina as confirming the wisdom of the isolationist, somewhat pro-Peiping course he has already embarked upon...Indonesia...would be emboldened in its efforts to crush Malaysia...The outcome in South Vietnam and Laos would conspicuously support the aggressive tactical contentions of Peiping as contrasted with the more cautious position of the USSR. To some degree this will tend to encourage and strengthen the more activist revolutionary movements in various parts of the underdeveloped world.

A copy of this document now in the file of John McNaughton at the Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library, which has hand-written emphases in its margins, supports McNamara’s suggestion that the Pentagon considered this memo to be a confirmation of its concern about domino effects.⁷³

⁷¹ SNIE 50-64, “Short-term Prospects in Southeast Asia” (12 Feb 1964), the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 19 Feb 2007.

⁷² Memo, CIA, “The Situation in Southeast Asia” (18 May 1964), LBJL, NSC, CFV, Box 4, Folder 6, #14.

⁷³ Memo, CIA, “Would the Loss of South Vietnam and Laos Precipitate a “Domino Effect” in the Far East?” (9 June 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers (John McNaughton Files), Box 2, Folder 6, #36.

Underestimating opportunities and uncertainty

The domino theory became far less persuasive after the start of the air strikes against the DRV in February 1965. In mid-1965, Indonesian President Sukarno (a driving force behind his country's aggressive, pro-Chinese foreign policy) was overthrown by the military and replaced by Suharto, who was of pro-Western inclination. Thailand turned out to be one of the first countries to send its troops to South Vietnam in support of the GVN and the United States. Soon, Communist China was to descend into a socioeconomic crisis after the launch of the Cultural Revolution in May 1966. Already during the congressional hearing on the Vietnam War in February 1966 Gen. Maxwell Taylor had to defend the administration's policy by focusing on what Senator Claiborne Pell called the "leapfrog domino theory," the argument that while the fall of the GVN might not affect neighbouring countries, it would have negative repercussions in Africa or Latin America. This prompted Pell to point out that the Soviet capitulation in the Cuban Missile Crisis had shown no major adverse effect in the Communist bloc. Why, the senator asked, would "dominos fall this, [but] not the other way"?⁷⁴ This possibility – or "the Domino Theory in reverse" as Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt called it at the SEATO conference in June 1966 – proved to be exactly what the Western bloc began to pursue in Southeast Asia though the spread of the market economy in 1966.⁷⁵ As the region became less vulnerable to communist influence during the rest of the decade, it became increasingly difficult for the U.S. public to see why the United States had to pay such a high price to defend the GVN.

This does not necessarily mean that the CIA's warnings about domino effects in 1964 were unsound: geopolitics in Southeast Asia could have evolved quite differently had the United States abandoned the GVN in 1964 or 1965. Nonetheless, those developments after 1965 did point to the pitfall of the Agency's focus on the threats to the U.S. national interests. Presenting wide enough issues and probabilities is an important aspect of intelligence estimates. As Donald Steury explains:

Highly predictive in nature, the typical NIE [National Intelligence Estimate] consisted largely of informed judgements about future actions or situations that ultimately could not be proved, however well-founded they might be in experience or factual or theoretical knowledge...In general, therefore, NIEs would try to convey the full range of possibilities, even though they might come down firmly in favour of one particular set of conclusions.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Joseph Fry, *Debating Vietnam: Fulbright, Stennis, and Their Senate Hearings* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), p. 59.

⁷⁵ Paul Ham, *Vietnam: The Australian War* (New York: HaperCollins, 2007), pp. 254-255.

⁷⁶ Donald Steury "Introduction" in Kent, *Sherman Kent and the Board of National*

It is worth noting that the documents produced in 1962 and 1963 tended to pay more attention to those wider possibilities including those favourable to the U.S. national interests. Two studies commissioned by the department in mid-1962 and completed in early 1963 (the 124-page research paper “Regionalism and Security in Mainland Southeast Asia” on 28 January 1963 written by INR analyst Charles Spinks and the 99-page study “Divisive Forces in Southeast Asia” on February 1963 completed by Bernard Gordon, a researcher at the Washington-based think-tank Institute for Defense Analyses) explored the possibility of a region-wide approach as an important but neglected aspect of U.S. policy towards Southeast Asia.⁷⁷ “Even in this fragmented area,” Gordon argued, “certain common movements are developing – what might properly be called ‘regionalism’ – and...these regional factors in Southeast Asia offer opportunities for US policy and action which will contribute to freeing us from the dilemma we faced in Laos and will assist in assuring mainland Southeast Asia against Communist aggression.”⁷⁸ The CIA memo “Communist Threats in Southeast Asia” (24 May 1962) also presented a relatively balanced assessment. While this document did acknowledge that a communist victory in Laos and South Vietnam might lead to “a loss of nerve and will on the existing [non-communist] regimes” in Southeast Asia, “a traditional spirit of ‘accommodation’” and “a step-by-step subversion of the governments themselves,” it also added:

[T]here is nothing foreordained about such a process. It is conceivable that, even if Laos and South Vietnam were lost to communism, the other states of the area would still find the strength and will to preserve their national independence. The manner in which communism won in South Vietnam and Laos could give rise to a variety of unforeseeable counterforces...In any case, the project of Chinese Communist power over Southeast Asia would not be a foregone conclusion.⁷⁹

What those documents in 1962 and 1963, together with the actual developments

Estimate: Collected Essay. See also: Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, “Too Much Certainty,” pp. 126-127.

⁷⁷ INR, INR-7, “Regionalism and Security in Mainland Southeast Asia” (28 Jan 1963), JFKL, NSF, Regional Security, Box 231A, “Southeast Asia, General, 1/63–5/63, #1–1c; IDA, “Divisive Forces in Southeast Asia” (Feb 1963), JFKL, James Thompson Papers, Box 19, “Southeast Asia, 1961–1966: General: IDA Study “Divisive Forces in Southeast Asia” (2/63).” See also: Memo, State, “Regionalism in the Far East” (9 Aug 1962) JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 8, “[State Dept, Chester Bowles, 1960–1966, Mission to Southeast Asia, 1962] “Regionalism in the Far East” 8/9/62”; Memo, DIA, “Divisive Forces in Southeast Asia” (Feb 1963), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 19, “Southeast Asia, 1961–1966: General: IDA Study “Divisive Forces in Southeast Asia” (2/63).”

⁷⁸ IDA, “Divisive Forces in Southeast Asia” (Feb 1963), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 19, “Southeast Asia, 1961–1966: General: IDA Study “Divisive Forces in Southeast Asia” (2/63).”

⁷⁹ Memo, CIA/ONE to McCone, “Communist Threat in Southeast Asia” (24 May 1962), NA, CREST 79R00904A000800020004-0.

during the second half of the 1960s, indicate is that the intelligence materials in 1964 – especially the June 1964 memo discussed earlier – should have placed more emphasis on the opportunities for the Western bloc, the limits of communist influence in Southeast Asia, and the basic unpredictability of international politics.

Chapter 6

South Vietnam: Problems and Prospects, 1964

During the policy debate in 1964, advocates of military action against North Vietnam justified their position partly on the assumption that such a bold action would boost the morale of the GVN, stop infiltration into the RVN and thereby turn the tide of the conflict.¹

The intelligence panel in the Vietnam Working Group in the NSC questioned this assumption during the policy review in November 1964. It suggested that low morale and infiltration were merely two of the complex problems facing the GVN, implying that improvement in those two areas would have only a limited effect on the long-term prospects of the counterinsurgency:

Even under the best of circumstances...reversal of present military trends will be extremely difficult...The basic elements of Communist strength in South Vietnam remain indigenous: South Vietnamese grievances, war weariness, defeatism, and political disarray; VC terror, arms capture, disciplined organization, highly developed intelligence systems, and ability to recruit locally; and the fact that the VC enjoys some status as a nationalist movement.²

This can be seen as a major achievement of intelligence analysts that supports the “sound but ignore” interpretation of Vietnam intelligence promoted by Harold Ford, John McCone and Ray Cline. Nevertheless, this should not obscure the fact that the intelligence on South Vietnam in 1964 was neither a clear-cut success nor an insignificant part of Vietnam policy. Although the intelligence community made progress on some issues (such as the sources of political instability, the administrative problems on the frontline, and the pattern of military attacks by

¹ See for example: Memo, W. Bundy, “Summary: Courses of Action in Southeast Asia” (26 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #13; Memo, Cline to McCone “Vietnam” (27 Nov 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 10, Folder 5, #93a; Memo, “Instructions from the President to Ambassador Taylor as approved by the President, Dec 3 1964” (3 Dec 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 11, Folder 1, #160a; Memo, M Bundy to the President (7 Feb 1964), LBJL, NSF, International Meetings and Travel File, Box 28, Folder 2, #2.

² NSC Working Group on Vietnam, “Section I: Intelligence Assessment, the Situation in Vietnam” (24 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #9. In fact, the JCS tried to soften those negative comments, arguing that “a very modest change in the government’s favor...may be enough to turn the tide and lead to a successful solution.” Memo, Mustin to W. Bundy, “Comment on Draft for Part I of Project Outline on Courses of Action in Southeast Asia – ‘The Situation’” (10 Nov 64), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 2, #16 and 16a; Memo, “Suggested Revisions for Section I, ‘The Situation’” (12 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 2, #25; Memo, Mustin to W. Bundy, “Comment on 13 November 1964 Draft for Section I of Project Outline on Courses of Action in Southeast Asia – ‘Intelligence Assessment: The Situation in Vietnam’” (18 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 3, #18.

insurgents), reliable, in-depth analysis on some of the key factors (including the morale of friendly forces, the attitude of the rural community, and the nationalist driving force behind the NLF) remained almost entirely absent throughout 1964. Moreover, while some document – such as the SNIE 53-2-64 in October and the intelligence panel’s report mentioned earlier – identified a range of problems facing the GVN and implied the difficulty of changing the tide of the conflict, it remained unclear how and to what extent changes in infiltration and morale would affect the overall landscape of the conflict in the RVN. Those gaps in intelligence products can be seen at least as a permissive factor for the decision for military action against the DRV.

1. Political instability

Gen. Khanh’s regime, which came to power upon the second coup in late January 1964, remained relatively stable during the first three months. From May onward, however, the regime faced growing threats from inside and outside the government, leading to another crisis in September. The CIA’s weekly reports and intelligence memoranda skilfully analysed various elements involved in this new round of political turmoil.

As in 1963, political instability emerged in May 1964 with the rising tension between the Buddhist and Catholic communities. By June, it had escalated to the point where moderate leaders on both sides found it increasingly difficult to control.³ Meanwhile, the relations among junta members continued to be tense and unpredictable. While the feud among three leading figures – Khanh (the Prime Minister), Minh (the Chief of State) and Khiem (the Defense Minister) – kept themselves and other generals on the alert for or against a coup d’état,⁴ the release

³ The religious problem was regularly mentioned in the CIA’s weekly reports. See for example: CIA, Weekly Report “The Situation in South Vietnam” (7 May 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 4, Folder 3, #135; CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (13 May 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 4, Folder 6, #15; CIA, Monthly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (18 May 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 4, Folder 6, #13; CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam: Annex: Monthly Report” (17 June 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 5, Folder 6, #10; CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam: Annex: Monthly Report” (17 June 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 5, Folder 6, #10; CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (24 June 1964) LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 5, Folder 6, #9.

⁴ For the complex relations among those three generals, see for example: CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (29 July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 6, Folder 5, #233a. For the tension between Khanh and Minh, see: CIA, Monthly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (18 May 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 4, Folder 6, #13; CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (29 July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 6, Folder 5, #233a. For the threat by Khiem (in particularly, the allegation that he was involved in “political activities on behalf of the Catholics, Dai Viet, and some former members of Diem’s Can Lao Party,” and the “rampant” rumour in military circles that

in July of four “Dalat generals” (Don, Kim, Dinh and Xuan, who had been arrested during Khanh’s coup in January and held in Dalat) also indicated a “further weakening of [Khanh’s] already tenuous control over the military leadership.”⁵ Compounding this was the rising influence of the Dai Viet (a nationalist political party) and Nguyen Ton Hoan (the leader of its southern faction who also served as the Deputy Prime Minister for Pacification). The fact that several commanders around Saigon were known to be Dai Viet members, together with the rumour that Khiem had Dai Viet ties, fuelled the speculation that the party was becoming the focal point of a plot against the Premier.⁶ At the same time, Hoan was busy rallying major political parties and religious sects to establish a mass organisation (“United Nationalist Forces”) as a political base of the government,⁷ even when Khanh was trying to balance the power of different organisations so that no one group could become powerful enough to challenge his regime.⁸ Meanwhile, the civilian-military tension emerged as another source of instability. Whereas the civilian population (including politicians, intellectuals, mass media and students) criticised the centralisation of power in the hands of the military and pressured Khanh to broaden the base of the government,⁹ the military demanded tougher control which it claimed was necessary for effective conduct of counterinsurgency, arguing that “military victory must take precedence over democracy.”¹⁰ All this evolved against the backdrop of the lack of clear progress in the war effort, which intensified the public frustration with Khanh’s leadership.¹¹

Then, after the Gulf of Tonkin incident on 2 and 4 August, Saigon descended into a political crisis from which it never fully recovered until February 1965. A chain of events was triggered on 7 August when Khanh – using the U.S. retaliatory attack against North Vietnam on the previous day as an excuse – declared a state of

Khiem was intriguing against Khanh), see: CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (8 July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 6, Folder 2, #48a; CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (22 July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 6, Folder 5, #234.

⁵ CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam: Annex: Monthly Report” (17 June 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 5, Folder 6, #10.

⁶ CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (5 Aug 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 7, Folder 2, #123.

⁷ CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (13 May 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 4, Folder 6, #15; CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (15 July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 6, Folder 2, #47.

⁸ CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (7 May 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 4, Folder 3, #135.

⁹ CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam: Annex: Monthly Report” (17 June 1964) LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 5, Folder 6, #10.

¹⁰ CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (24 June 1964) LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 5, Folder 6, #9.

¹¹ CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (13 May 1964) LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 4, Folder 6, #15; CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam: Annex: Monthly Report” (17 June 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 5, Folder 6, #10.

emergency and gave the Military Revolutionary Council “all but absolute power.”¹² This was followed by a restructuring of the government on 16 August, which made Khanh the President (replacing Minh) and reduced civilian power in the administration.¹³ These moves to strengthen the power of the military and curtail civil liberties led Buddhists and students to stage demonstrations against what they regarded as Khanh’s “dictatorial” rule.¹⁴ Further accusations and threats by militant monk Tri Quang forced Khanh to resign from the presidency and repeal the 16 August Charter.¹⁵ These concessions irritated the military and increased the risk of coup d’état. Reportedly losing confidence in his ability to outmanoeuvre his rivals and suffering from “physical ailment and emotional exhaustion,” Khanh retired to Dalat in late August, causing a power vacuum in Saigon.¹⁶ With pledges of support from key generals, however, the premier returned to the capital on 3 September and introduced further reform designed to reduce Dai Viet influence, sending Hoan overseas and removing Dai Viet commanders near Saigon,¹⁷ who several days later (13 September) attempted a coup d’état. These “rebel generals” temporarily occupied Saigon and declared victory, but their attempt was soon subdued by young officers, including Air Force Commander Gen. Ky.¹⁸ This helped boost the influence of the “Young Turks” vis-à-vis the older generation of commanders, adding further complications to Khanh’s leadership of the military.

After all these events, Khanh abandoned the idea of strengthening the military’s control over politics and in late September set up a High National Council as a step towards a civilian-led government while also attempting to retain “honorary” influence of the military. This initiative was fully supported by Ambassador Taylor, and the Council’s selection of Phan Khac Suu as the new chief of state on 25 October offered some promise for stability.¹⁹ The long-term viability of the GVN remained uncertain, however. While old tension remained among various political and religious organizations, the government faced new threats to

¹² CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (13 Aug 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 7, Folder 2, #124.

¹³ CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (20 Aug 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 7, Folder 6, #189.

¹⁴ CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (20 Aug 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 7, Folder 6, #189; CIA/OCI, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (27 Aug 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 7, Folder 6, #187.

¹⁵ CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (27 Aug 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 7, Folder 6, #187.

¹⁶ CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam (2 Sept 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 8, Folder 3 #132.

¹⁷ CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam (9 Sept 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 8, Folder 3 #131.

¹⁸ CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam (10–16 Sept 1964)” (17 Sept 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 9, Folder 1, #286.

¹⁹ CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam (22–28 Oct 1964)” LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 9, Folder 6, #170.

its stability, including labour strikes, protests by ethnic minorities (“Rhade uprising”) and the “People’s Revolutionary Committee” orchestrated by Professor Le Khac Quyen and other faculty members of Hué University.²⁰

The quality of the reports on the political instability in mid- to late 1964 differed across the key subjects. On the one hand, intelligence remained relatively weak on the inner workings of groups outside the government and the NLF’s influence on those organisations (even though the CIA was at least consistent in its judgment that the NLF might abet the political instability but did not directly instigate public protests, which developed in large part on their own initiative).²¹ On the other hand, the GVN was comparatively less opaque to the U.S. government thanks to the U.S. mission’s network of contacts with the South Vietnamese ruling elite. Furthermore, intelligence on the nature of the Buddhist movement became much clearer than it had been in 1963. The CIA’s Special Report on religious problems of 17 September in particular provided a relatively clear picture with regard to the structure of the main Buddhist organisation (the Unified Buddhist Association of Vietnam) and the intentions of militant leader Tri Quang (an “ambitious, skillful, ruthless political manipulator and born demagogue” according to the report). It also explored the historical background of Buddhist-Catholic tensions to explain why the Buddhist community was so susceptible to Tri Quang’s militant agitation.²² An equally important achievement was the analysis of diverse factors in the wider socio-political and historical contexts. The point was most clearly articulated in NIE 53-64 (“Chances for a Stable Government in South Vietnam”) of 8 September, the opening sentence of which reads: “the downfall of the Diem regime released powerful political forces previously suppressed or underground.”²³ This suggested that the political

²⁰ CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam (9 Sept 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 8, Folder 3 #131. CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (24 Sept 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 9, Folder 1, #285; CIA, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (31 Sept 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 9, Folder 1, #283; CIA, “The Situation in South Vietnam (1–7 Oct 1964),” LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 9, Folder 3, #108; CIA, “The Situation in South Vietnam (22–28 Oct 1964),” LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 9, Folder 6, #170. For the Rhade uprising, see also: Memo, Carver to Cooper, “The Montagnard Problems in South Vietnam” (15 Dec 1964), CREST 80R01720R000500010003-9.

²¹ See for example: CIA, Weekly Report “The Situation in South Vietnam (2 Sept 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 8, Folder 3, #132; CIA, “The Situation in South Vietnam (22–28 Oct 1964),” LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 9, Folder 6, #170.

²² CIA, Intelligence Memorandum, “Tri Quang and the Buddhist-Catholic Discord in South Vietnam” (19 Sept 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 9, Folder 1, #262. This document was produced after *New York Times* published two articles on 13 and 14 September on the religious problem, and on 14 September DCI McCone asked his analysts for “as deep an analysis as possible of the Buddhist movement, objectives, political actions and organization.” Memo, McCone to Cline (14 Sept 1964), NA, CREST 80R01720R000500010010-1.

²³ SNIE 53-64, “Chances for a Stable Government in South Vietnam” (8 Sept 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 8, Folder 3, #98.

instability did not have a simple solution, and that military action against North Vietnam would not resolve the precarious nature of South Vietnamese politics.

2. Counterinsurgency

Meanwhile, the negative trends in the countryside remained largely unchanged. The atmosphere was in fact slightly more relaxed in April and early May, when the regime was more or less stable and the counterinsurgency showed some signs of recovery. This hardly boosted the confidence in Washington, however. “[T]here has been a slight improvement overall in the last month,” Forrestal reported after his trip to Saigon in May 1964, “[but] the trend has definitely not yet turned in our favor.”²⁴ The Pentagon too remained cautious, even mentioning the possibility of another Dien Bien Phu during its conference in May.²⁵ The following five months were marked by a lack of progress in the war effort and a steady increase in VC capabilities. Intelligence made some progress, but continued to be weak on human-based factors such as the morale of the ARVN and the attitude of the rural community.

Technical problems on the front line

Apart from purely military operations by the ARVN, the progress in pacification was largely confined to planning and preparation in Saigon. By the end of June, pacification plans had been drawn up for most provinces,²⁶ and directives were issued for some specific projects, including the Mobile Action Cadre.²⁷ After the arrival in July of the new ambassador, Maxwell Taylor, the Embassy renewed its efforts to strengthen the liaison mechanism between the U.S. mission and the GVN National Security Council, which worked together in the following months to launch a new project (Operation Hop Tac) in the provinces around Saigon²⁸ However, these efforts in Saigon did not result in tangible progress in the countryside. As the CIA observed in June 1964, “Pacification efforts still show few

²⁴ Memo, Forrestal to M Bundy “South Vietnam [post-trip report]” (26 May 1964), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 24, Folder “Southeast Asia, 1961–1966, Vietnam, General, 3/64–5/64.”

²⁵ Memo for the record, Mount, “Sec/Def–COMUSMACV Conference, 0900-1300, 13 May 1964,” NA, RG 218, Records of Gen. Maxwell Taylor, Box 13, “091 Vietnam, May 1964.”

²⁶ CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam: Annex: Monthly Report” (17 June 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 5, Folder 6, #10.

²⁷ CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (1 July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 6, Folder 2, #49.

²⁸ CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (24 Sept 1964), LBL, NSF, CFV, Box 9, Folder 1, #285; CIA, “The Situation in South Vietnam (22–28 Oct 1964),” LBL, NSF, CFV, Box 9, Folder 6, #170.

real gains. Planning and organization of the program continues to occupy most of the time and talent of those charged with its implementation.”²⁹ This continued in July and August³⁰ (with the notable exception of mid-July, when “The pacification effort in the fourteen critical provinces moved forward slowly”³¹), leading to another warning in late September that “Although pacification planning continues in the GVN National Security Council, the Embassy has the feeling that the decisions taken are not being implemented with any great enthusiasm or to any significant degree.”³²

The fact that policies and concepts agreed upon in Saigon rarely resulted in successful operations in the countryside drew attention to the problem of implementation. What became clearer to some, if not many, in mid-1964 was that, as Thomas Ahern later pointed out, policy proposals had a tendency to “mistake the desirable for the possible,”³³ ignoring many weaknesses and constraints on the front line. In May, William Colby wrote a memo to address this problem, reminding readers that “the GVN at the grass roots is not working well, and it is here that the war is being fought. Outmoded concepts, directives and practices, bureaucratic constipation, insufficient on-the-spot resources and erratic commitment or withdrawal of forces have occurred in various proportion to make all too rare the cases wherein the GVN has seized the initiative.”³⁴ Shortly afterward, William Sullivan (State Department) made a similar point when he argued, “Starting with the fact that counter insurgency is a very complex business, we should examine whether the various programs which the Vietnamese have laid out...amount to more than they are technically and administratively capable of handling.”³⁵

²⁹ CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam: Annex: Monthly Report” (17 June 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 5, Folder 6, #10. See also: MACV J-3, “Monthly Evaluation, April 1964” (11 May 1964), NA, RG 218, Records of Gen. Maxwell Taylor, Box 13, “091 Vietnam, May 1964.”

³⁰ See the CIA’s weekly reports from June to August, especially: CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (22 July 1964) LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 6, Folder 5, #234; CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (29 July 1964) LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 6, Folder 5, #233a; CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (5 Aug 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 7, Folder 2, #123; CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (13 Aug 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 7, Folder 2, #124; CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (20 Aug 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 7, Folder 6, #189; CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (27 Aug 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 7, Folder 6, #187.

³¹ CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (22 July 1964) LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 6, Folder 5, #234.

³² CIA, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (31 Sept 1964) LBL, NSF, CFV, Box 9, Folder 1, #283. For the lack of enthusiasm, see also: CIA, “The Situation in South Vietnam (8–14 Oct 1964)” LBL, NSF, CFV, Box 9, Folder 3, #107.

³³ Ahern, *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam*, p. 134.

³⁴ Memo, Colby, “The Situation” (11 May 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 4, Folder 2, #116.

³⁵ Memo, Sullivan to M. Bundy, “Check List on Viet Nam” (21 May 1964), LBJL, NSF,

Some of the administrative and procedural problems became clearer by late 1964. One of them was the lack of coordination between civilian and military authorities and the resulting absence of military support for pacification. A report by Maj. Gen. Charles Timmer (the Chief of MAAC from March 1962 to May 1964) in July, for example, devoted much of its space to this problem,³⁶ while the MACV also acknowledged in May that the overall pattern of military operations was not synchronised with the Pacification Plan, admitting that military operations in support of pacification amounted to only 4 percent of the South Vietnamese Air Force's activities.³⁷ Another major problem was the ineffective system of financing and resource allocation, which was emphasised by Sullivan, the Embassy and the CIA. The Agency, for instance, warned in October, "The procedure for funding Hop Tac is increasingly a problem. The Hop Tac problem illustrates in acute form the present uncertainty as to who will fund programs."

Reports also identified some sources of those administrative weaknesses, including an "overly ambitious effort to get the program launched" which caused "improper phasing" of the projects; the ill-defined jurisdiction of different departments/agencies in the GVN; bureaucratic turf battles within both the GVN and the U.S. mission³⁸; and the political instability in Saigon, which caused frequent changes of district and province chiefs³⁹ and a fragmentation of the command around the capital as a counter-coup measure.⁴⁰ Reports also

CFV, Box 4, Folder 7, #56.

³⁶ Debriefing of Senior and Designated Key Officers Returning from Filed Assignments, Maj. Gen. Charles J. Timmer (22 July 1964), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 18, "1964: Jul.-Dec."

³⁷ MACV J3 "Monthly Evaluation, April 1964" (11 May 1964) NA, RG 218, Records of Gen. Maxwell Taylor, Box 13, "091 Vietnam, May 1964." The CIA confirmed this in June, noting that "Indications of conflicts of authority between army and civilian officials are evident and extend from Saigon down to the province and district levels." CIA, Weekly Report, "The Situation in South Vietnam: Annex: Monthly Report" (17 June 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 5, Folder 6, #10. The lack of cooperation was also a problem within the civilian side of the GVN. At a press conference in July the Minister of Social Welfare "spoke frankly" of his frustrations with the lack of cooperation from other ministries. CIA, Weekly Report, "The Situation in South Vietnam" (8 July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 6, Folder 2, #48a.

³⁸ For the "Army-Air Force controversy" within MACV, see: Memo, Smart, "Meeting at Keehi Beach on 12 March" (8 April 1964), NA, RG 218, Records of Gen. Maxwell Taylor, Box 13, "091 Vietnam Trip, 9-14 May 1964."

³⁹ For example, the CIA estimated that from mid-September to mid-October, Khanh replaced at least ten province chiefs. CIA, "The Situation in South Vietnam (15-21 Oct 1964)," LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 9, Folder 6, #171.

⁴⁰ CIA, Monthly Report, "The Situation in South Vietnam" (18 May 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 4, Folder 6, #13; CIA, Weekly Report, "The Situation in South Vietnam" (22 July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 6, Folder 5, #234; CIA, Weekly Report, "The Situation in South Vietnam" (24 Sept 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 9, Folder 1, #285. As another negative consequence of the political instability, the CIA reported on 17 June that "the Airborne Brigade since 5 June has been committing only one battalion to operations, keeping the other five in their garrison areas" as "a precaution against coup attempts." CIA, Weekly Report, "The Situation in South Vietnam" (17 June 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 5,

acknowledged that many of the administrative problems partly stemmed from the very nature of counterinsurgency, which required adaptation to diverse conditions across the country and what Gen. Timmer described as “a truly integrated military-political-economic-sociological-psychological effort, on both the US and host-country sides...at all levels.”⁴¹

Human factors: friendly forces and the rural community

Another problem on the front line was the limited competence of GVN officers, or what the CIA described as “a shortage of talent and cohesiveness at all levels.”⁴² The lack of qualified leaders, in particular, was acknowledged as a major problem by David Palmer and John Connor. Warning that leadership was “in the shortest supply,” Palmer argued that “Aggressiveness and initiative are contrary to the Vietnamese character.”⁴³ Similarly, Connor saw leadership as being “perilously thin” and “the most precious and least available commodity in South Vietnam (the VC are well endowed with leaders)” due to “attrition by death, wounds and disease, and to the ousting of many competent leaders after the anti-Diem coup.”⁴⁴

The analysis of the morale among friendly forces appeared contradictory and unreliable, especially with regard to the regular forces, if not militias whose low morale appeared undisputable. After his trip to Saigon in April, for example, Gen. Earls Wheeler (Army Chief of Staff) reported that the South Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) was “poorly motivated and practices the custom of going off duty at noon on Saturdays for the weekend.”⁴⁵ This was denied in May by Gen. Moore, who argued that the basis of Wheeler’s comment was “taken out of context” and presented his own view that the VNAF’s morale was “pretty good now and

Folder 6, #10.

⁴¹ Debriefing of Senior and Designated Key Officers Returning from Filed Assignments, Maj. Gen. Charles J. Timmer (22 July 1964), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 18, “1964: Jul.–Dec.”

⁴² CIA, Monthly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (18 May 1964) LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 4, Folder 6, #13. See also: CIA, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam (8–14 Oct 1964)” LBL, NSF, CFV, Box 9, Folder 3, #107.

⁴³ Memo, Palmer, “Noteworthy Characters of ARVN” (1 Aug 1964), LBJL, Westmoreland Papers, Box 3, “#7 (History Backup) 27 Jul 64–31 Aug 64 [I],” #15.

⁴⁴ Connor judged that, of six regimental commanders in the area he was working, “only two could be considered above a classification of mediocre, and some are very bad indeed. Leadership below regimental level is almost non-existent.” Debriefing of Senior and Designated Key Officers Returning from Field Assignments, Col. John P. Connor (2 March 1964), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 18, “1964: Feb–Apr.”

⁴⁵ Report, Wheeler to McNamara and JCS, “Visit to the Republic of South Vietnam, 15–20 April 1964” (n.d.), acquired through FOIA request. Forrestal also pointed out the lack of a sense of urgency in May, observing that “Vietnamese bureaucracy is still having the greatest difficulty in cranking itself up to fighting the war in the countryside...there just isn’t the necessary sense of urgency.” Memo, Forrestal to M Bundy “South Vietnam” (26 May 1964), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 24, “Southeast Asia, 1961–1966, Vietnam, General, 3/64–5/64.

improving under General Ky.”⁴⁶ A MACV memo written around the same time, however, observed that the loss and replacement of leaders after the November coup had caused the “demoralization” of middle-ranking officers and that discontentment and apathy had reached the ordinary soldiers in the first quarter of 1964. As a consequence, the desertion rate rose “in an alarming fashion.”⁴⁷ Yet, in July, a MACV survey of U.S. advisors’ opinions across the country led Ambassador Taylor to conclude that “morale in general remains good to excellent at the troop and leadership levels...the general attitude is one of confidence that the pacification program will work.”⁴⁸ In August, David Palmer reached a similar conclusion. Dismissing comments about war-weariness as “over-played,” Palmer argued that battle losses had a smaller effect on morale than widely believed, adding that “The units I observed were either not affected by casualties or actually had a higher esprit after a little blood-letting.”⁴⁹ The lack of reliable assessment of morale in the GVN had an important policy implication, since one of the key objectives of military action against North Vietnam was to boost morale and thereby to improve the GVN’s performance. This line of argument would be unsound if the morale in the friendly forces was not low and/or the problem in morale was a relatively minor part of the overall problem in the performance of the GVN.

Solid intelligence was also missing on the attitude of the peasant community. The Viet Cong’s ability to successfully stage ambushes suggested both peasant reluctance to pass information to the GVN and the importance of overcoming this problem. However, while a “census grievance” program began to provide a better picture of the problems and conditions in the rural area,⁵⁰ there appeared to be no large-scale effort to investigate how operations by the GVN, the United States and

⁴⁶ Memo for the record, Mount, “Sec/Def–COMUSMACV Conference, 0900-1300, 13 May 1964” (n.d.), NA, RG 218, Records of Gen. Maxwell Taylor, Box 13, “091 Vietnam, May 1964.” For Westmoreland’s response, see: Letter, Westmoreland to Smart (9 June 1964), LBJL, Westmoreland Papers, Box 2, “#6 (History Backup) 1 Jun–3 Aug 64 [I],” #20.

⁴⁷ Memo for Westmoreland, “Military and Security Situation and Trends” (n.d., probably late May 1964), LBJL, Westmoreland Papers, Box 2, “#6 (History Backup) 1 Jun–3 Aug 64 [I],” #11. According to the MACV, the number of desertions in RVNAF and the paramilitary forces was 36,423 for 1963 and 27,863 for the first four months of 1964. Memo, Wilson to Westmoreland, “Comparative Casualties between Current Vietnamese Counterinsurgency Effort and Major US Wars” (12 June 1964), LBJL, Westmoreland Papers, Box 2, “#6 (History Backup) 1 Jun–3 Aug 64 [I],” #50.

⁴⁸ Cable, Saigon to State (28 July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 6, Folder 3, #28. See also the original report: Report, Col. Ben H. Ward “Survey of Morale and Attitudes in RVNAF” (27 July 1964) LBJL, Westmoreland Papers, Box 2, “#6 (History Backup) 1 June 64–3 Aug 1964 [II],” #108 and 108a.

⁴⁹ Memo, Palmer, “Moral of the Vietnamese Army” (1 Aug 1964), LBJL, Westmoreland Papers, Box 3, “#7 (History Backup) 27 Jul 64–31 Aug 64 [I],” #11.

⁵⁰ Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified*, pp. 128-130, 134.

the NLF affected peasant lives and perceptions. As a result, comments on peasant attitudes remained largely speculative and varied significantly. At the relatively optimistic side of the spectrum, for instance, one of the Embassy's provincial staff felt in July that "rural antipathy toward the Viet Cong has increased because of indiscriminate Communist terrorism and heavier tax demands" and that "they would prefer to side with the government if guaranteed security."⁵¹ In contrast, those who were familiar with socio-cultural and historical contexts tended to be more cautious. Col. Connor, for example, emphasised that the people in the Delta were "not acquainted with government in any form, be it French, Diem, or post-coup" and strongly resented government efforts to tax them. The enemy forces "capitalize on this attitude and encourage them to resist any form of government control."⁵² Prince Souvanna Phouma of Laos was even more pessimistic when he told U. Alexis Johnson (the Deputy Chief of the U.S. mission) in August that the people in the countryside "really see no reason to commit themselves to the Government's fight," pointing out that "these people will never forget the promises made by the French that they, the French, would protect these people." Moreover, he added, Viet Cong propaganda was telling them that the Americans, like the French, wished to rule the land, and that "to be a patriotic is to side the Viet Cong."⁵³ In August 1964, this lack of solid study on peasant attitudes was discussed in a State memo, which noted, "We are told repeatedly that this is a war for the minds of the people, but it is being fought as though it were a game of kriegspiel, in which we perceive only our own moves but have to guess at the reactions they induce."⁵⁴

3. Strengths of the NLF

Rebuilding its pacification programmes amid the insurgency proved an extremely difficult task for the GVN. The CIA's weekly reports regularly recorded how small achievements the GVN made in certain parts of the country were almost nullified by insurgents, who often concentrated their efforts on areas where the GVN was beginning to make some progress.⁵⁵ Although some aspects of the NLF (notably

⁵¹ CIA, Weekly Report, "The Situation in South Vietnam" (22 July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 6, Folder 5, #234.

⁵² Debriefing of Senior and Designated Key Officers Returning from Field Assignments, Col. John P. Connor (2 Mar 1964), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 18, "1964: Feb-Apr."

⁵³ Memorandum of conversation, U Alexis Johnson with Prince Souvanna Phouma in Laos (3 August 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 9, Folder 3, #97a.

⁵⁴ Memo, Zwick, Cooper, Hymann and Moorsteen, "Notes on Current U.S. Problem Areas in Vietnam" (4 Aug 1964), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 24, "Southeast Asia, 1961-1964, Vietnam, General, 6/64-8/64."

⁵⁵ See for example: CIA, Weekly Report, "The Situation in South Vietnam" (22 July 1964),

the armed attacks against the GVN) became reasonably clear, insurgents continued to conceal themselves and their activities effectively from the GVN and the United States.

By mid-1964, it had become obvious that the pattern of the enemy's military operations was making it difficult for the friendly forces to respond. The MACV's analysis showed that insurgents were effectively combining small-scale actions ("harassment and terrorism") with large-scale (that is, company and battalion-size) attacks against GVN facilities, such as training camps. Although large-scale attacks were relatively small in number (usually fewer than ten a month), they caused considerable damage to the friendly forces. According to MACV statistics, during the period from 1 July to 16 August only 14% of the Viet Cong attacks were company and battalion-size, but they accounted for "75% of the total government killed, 84% of the wounded, 84% of these missing, and 78% of the weapons lost."⁵⁶ The need to respond to these large-scale attacks across the country partly explains why the GVN and the MACV did not abandon their structure and tactics designed for conventional war, and failed to provide sufficient support for pacification programmes.

The NLF's capabilities behind those offensives remained difficult to analyse, however. Reports on related subjects – such as the number of insurgents, the rate of infiltration, command and control, and intelligence network – tended to underline the limitations, rather than the successes, of the intelligence community. In July 1964, for example, the MACV revised its estimates of VC regular forces from 23,000–27,000 to 28,000–34,000 not because of an actual increase in enemy cadres but because of the "acceptance of existence of units suspected for two or three years for which confirmatory evidence has become available only in the last few months."⁵⁷ The intelligence community might have been slightly more confident about the figures on infiltration, thanks in part to the information supplied by two captured VC prisoners in July, which made it possible to speculate that several groups of around 500 to 1000 men were being infiltrated into South Vietnam in 1964.⁵⁸ Yet intelligence on exact routes and methods of infiltration did not improve significantly.⁵⁹ Likewise, intelligence on the command and

LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 6, Folder 5, #234; CIA, Weekly Report, "The Situation in South Vietnam" (29 July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 6, Folder 5, #233a.

⁵⁶ CIA, Weekly Report "The Situation in South Vietnam" (2 Sept 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 8, Folder 3 #132.

⁵⁷ CIA, Weekly Report, "The Situation in South Vietnam" (15 July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 6, Folder 2, #47.

⁵⁸ CIA, Weekly Report, "The Situation in South Vietnam" (29 July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 6, Folder 5, #233a.

⁵⁹ For the progress in this field, see for example: INR, Intelligence Note, "Khanh's claim on increased North Vietnamese infiltration" (17 July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 6,

communication system and intelligence network of the NLF was based largely on deduction from the Front's successful conduct of military activities rather than on detailed evidence on those factors themselves.⁶⁰ These weaknesses in intelligence on the NLF led Ambassador Taylor to note in November that "The ability of the Viet-Cong continuously to rebuild their units and to make good their losses is one of the mysteries of this guerrilla war."⁶¹

The understanding of the insurgents' "amazing ability to maintain morale"⁶² was also hampered by Washington's identification of the enemy as communists, rather than nationalists. In fact, as policymakers must have known, the French government, Le Van Hoach (the South Vietnamese Minister of State) and the U.S. media all questioned this description in 1964. A report by the French Embassy in Saigon concluded that the NLF was "a resurgence of the national Vietnamese movement which began on September 2, 1945."⁶³ Le Van Hoach maintained that he "knows most of the leaders of the Viet Cong National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, and believes that many of them are non-Communist nationalists who could be won over to the government in a negotiated settlement of the war."⁶⁴ U.S. media also pointed out that the NLF had been formed in the late 1950s by various groups opposing the Diem regime. "The [media] reporting of the war itself," Walt Rostow (State Department) noted in May 1964, "tends to portray it as a vicious, indigenous civil war in which the United States has somehow become involved in ambiguous ways." Despite all this, Washington continued to assume the NLF to be largely a communist movement partly because of the absence of robust intelligence on the motivations and backgrounds of those who had joined the NLF. In October a CIA officer addressed this problem, writing: "the enemy:

Folder 5, #230; CIA, Special Report, "Viet Cong Infiltration into Northern South Vietnam" (23 Oct 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 9, Folder 6, #157.

⁶⁰ For example, the CIA reported in June, "Although there is no conclusive evidence, the nationwide intensification of Communist actions this past week would appear to indicate that government operations have not seriously affected Viet Cong command and communications control nor impaired Viet Cong capability to regulate the tempo of the insurgency." CIA, Weekly Report, "The Situation in South Vietnam" (17 June 1964) LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 5, Folder 6, #10.

⁶¹ Memo, Taylor, "The Current Situation in South Viet-Nam," (n.d. probably around 24 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #12.

⁶² Memo, Taylor, "The Current Situation in South Viet-Nam," (n.d. probably around 24 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #12.

⁶³ Memo, Furness to Corcoran, "Summary of Paper on National Liberation Front of South Viet-Nam [by the French Embassy in Saigon]" (18 Sept 1964), NA, RG 59, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, the Vietnam Working Group, Subject Files, 1963-1966, Box 4, "CSM 6 National Front for the Liberation of South Viet-Nam, 1964." For France's view on the NLF, see also: Cable, Saigon to State (9 March 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 2 [2 of 2], "Vietnam, vol. V (3/64), Cable [1 of 2]" #9; Cable, Paris to State (22 June 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 5, Folder 5, #73.

⁶⁴ CIA, Weekly Report, "The Situation in South Vietnam" (20 Aug 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 7, Folder 6, #189.

who exactly is he? Is he this monolithic bloc of Marxist communist seeping down from Hanoi with orders from Peiping to be executed faithfully without consideration of self and national interests? I submit we have made next to no effort to identify and systematically analyze this 'enemy.'”⁶⁵

4. Intelligence estimates

The intelligence community produced two (Special) National Intelligence Estimates on South Vietnam in 1964. The first (NIE 53-64 “Chances for a Stable Government in South Vietnam” on 8 September 1964) was focused on the political crisis. Therefore, only the second (SNIE 53-2-64 “Situation in South Vietnam” on 1 October 1964) examined the situation in the RVN in general. This second product in October was intended to send the warning that “the situation in South Vietnam has continued to deteriorate” since early August and that “the conditions favour a further decay of GVN will and effectiveness.” Outlining some of the negative trends (including signs of defeatism in the GVN leadership, tensions in the U.S.-GVN relations and the growing enemy strength in the cities), the document concluded: “The likely pattern of this decay will be increasing defeatism, paralysis of leadership, friction with Americans, exploitation of possible lines of political accommodation with the other side, and a general petering out of the war effort.” However, due to its relatively narrow focus on the short-term trends and prospects, this SNIE was not designed to provide a thorough analysis of the causes of those deteriorations.⁶⁶

During the following month, as mentioned earlier, the intelligence panel of the NSC Working Group did identify some of the main problems in South Vietnam (including the “political disarray” of the GVN, the NLF’s “highly developed intelligence systems,” its “ability to recruit locally,” and “the fact that the VC enjoys some status as a nationalist movement”), suggesting that, since the basic elements of the NLF’ strength remained indigenous, “even under the best of

⁶⁵ Memo, “Commentary on Special National Intelligence Estimate 53-2-64” (19 Oct 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 3, #14b. In support of their call for a diplomatic settlement, the French government and Le Van Hoach (South Vietnamese Minister of State) each made the case that the VC were largely “non-Communist nationalists.” Cable, Paris to State (22 June 1964) LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 5, Folder 5, #73; CIA/OCI, Weekly Report, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (20 Aug 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 7, Folder 6, #189.

⁶⁶ SNIE 53-2-64, “The Situation in South Vietnam” (1 Oct 1964), the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 4 Feb 2007. For its earlier draft, see Memo, CIA, “Deterioration in South Vietnam” (28 Sept 1964), NA, CREST 80B01676R001400050028-4; Memo, Carter to M Bundy (28 Sept 1964), NA, CREST 80B01676R001400050028-4.

circumstances...reversal of present military trends will be extremely difficult.”⁶⁷ This implied that air strikes against North Vietnam would not make a decisive impact on the conflict in the RVN.

The panel’s warning came too late, however, and appeared to be too confusing for senior policymakers to reconsider their basic assumptions. Even Ray Cline (the CIA’s Deputy Director for Intelligence) could not understand the complexity of the conflict in the RVN and continued to support military action against the DRV. In his memo for DCI McCone on 27 November written in “desperation of Thanksgiving Day,” Cline argued that “Out of the fog of medieval scholasticism surrounding many months of discussion of Vietnam, a few simple propositions seem to me to emerge as true. Most of the other subtle distinctions and arguments I have heard do not seem to me to affect the US course of action.” He maintained that U.S. action against the North would damage the will and capability of the NLS and boost the morale of the friendly forces. Those changes, Cline hoped, would allow the GVN to “improve the security situation in SVN, to gradually contain and eventually destroy the VC as an effective insurgent force, and to establish a stable, friendly government.”⁶⁸ Clearly, this was a scenario that analysts in his own organisation implied was questionable. Yet, given the dearth of reliable intelligence on some of the key factors in the counterinsurgency discussed earlier – including the morale of the South Vietnamese forces, the reason for peasants’ apathy toward the central government, and the driving forces behind insurgency – and the absence of a robust NIE in 1964, it is hardly surprising that the intelligence panel’s list of indigenous problems in November had little effect on the view of those who had already been convinced that action against the North was the most effective way to turn the tide of the conflict in the RVN.

⁶⁷ NSC Working Group on Vietnam, “Section I: Intelligence Assessment, the Situation in Vietnam” (24 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #9. In fact, the JCS tried to soften those negative comments, arguing that “a very modest change in the government’s favor...may be enough to turn the tide and lead to a successful solution.” Memo, Mustin to W. Bundy, “Comment on Draft for Part I of Project Outline on Courses of Action in Southeast Asia – ‘The Situation’” (10 Nov 64), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 2, #16 and 16a; Memo, “Suggested Revisions for Section I, ‘The Situation’” (12 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 2, #25; Memo, Mustin to W. Bundy, “Comment on 13 November 1964 Draft for Section I of Project Outline on Courses of Action in Southeast Asia – ‘Intelligence Assessment: The Situation in Vietnam’” (18 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 3, #18.

⁶⁸ Memo, Cline to M. Bundy (n.d.), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 10, Folder 5, #93; Memo, Cline to McCone “Vietnam” (27 Nov 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 10, Folder 5, #93a.

Chapter 7

North Vietnam: Intentions, Capabilities and Probable Response, 1964

The case for escalation was also based on the assumption that air strikes could force the DRV to cease its support for the NLF. At worst, it was assumed, Washington could start negotiating with the DRV from the position of strength (as against what proved to be the reality of plunging into a major war on the Asian Continent due partly to difficulties in bringing the North Vietnamese leaders to the negotiating table).¹

Intelligence on North Vietnam in 1964 had mixed implications for this side of calculations in Vietnam policy. On the one hand, the intelligence community could show that general trends in the DRV – in terms of politics, economy, internal security and military capabilities – and in the DRV's relations with China and the USSR made it difficult for the United States to change the policy of the North Vietnamese government through the use of military force. On the other hand, however, some aspects of the DRV, China and the USSR – their intentions in particular – remained highly uncertain, leaving some room for wishful thinking on the part of policymakers. Moreover, the intelligence estimates on the probable consequences of air strikes (SNIE 50-2-64 in April and SNIE 10-3-64 in September) not only failed to consider the worst case scenario that actually unfurled after February 1965 but also predicted that aerial campaign would result in Hanoi accepting at least a temporary suspension of its support for the NLF.

The way in which those intelligence estimates failed suggests that the policy preference in Washington, which was leaning towards escalations in mid-1964, had a distorting effect on intelligence estimates by narrowing down the range of scenarios discussed by analysts. In addition, the intelligence estimates on North Vietnam in 1964 also underline the fundamental technical limitations of gauging the intentions of a secretive regime and predicting policy outcomes in a dynamic international environment.

1. Lack of information

Available information on the DRV was limited in both quality and quantity. In

¹ See for example: Memo, JCS to McNamara, "Courses of Action in Southeast Asia" (23 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #6; Memo, W. Bundy, "Summary: Courses of Action in Southeast Asia" (26 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #13; Memo, M. Bundy to the President (7 Feb 1964), LBJL, NSF, International Meetings and Travel File, Box 28, Folder 2, #2.

1964 there appeared to be few, if any, American observers inside the DRV due to the lack of diplomatic ties between Hanoi and Washington and the ban on U.S. citizens' travel to the country.² Although some states in the Western bloc – including France, Britain and Canada – had small delegations in Hanoi, reports coming through these channels rarely contained strategically significant information.³ “Since the communist takeover of North Vietnam in 1954–55,” the CIA pointed out in 1964, “few official non-Communist personnel or journalists have been in the area, and their movements within the country have been greatly restricted.”⁴ Attempts to infiltrate South Vietnamese agents into the DRV – initially launched by the CIA in 1961 and transferred to the Studies and Observation Group (SOG) of the MACV in early 1964 – became, as Richard Shultz puts it, “a catastrophe of substantial proportions.” Virtually all of about 500 agents sent to the North between 1961 and 1967 are believed to be either killed, captured or turned into double agents soon after their arrival.⁵ U-2 flights over North Vietnam, which started in January 1961, were considerably more successful. Yet the aerial images they provided were largely confined to topography, transportation networks and large-scale military facilities.⁶ As a result, Washington had to rely extensively on Hanoi's official publication and broadcasts, such as the Communist Party's daily newspaper *Nanh Dan* and the elite journal *Hoc Tap*. While those open sources offered a valuable window to the country's internal affairs and the perceptions of the Communist Party, they were regularly distorted

² Memo, Mendenhall to Sullivan, “Exception to Passport Regulations to Permit American Newsmen to Visit North Viet-Nam” (29 Feb 1964), NA, RG 59, Entry 5305, Box 6, “POL 7 Visits, Meetings, 1964.”

³ See for example: Memorandum of conversation, Christian with Barthelemy, “February Report of the French Delegate-General in Hanoi” (16 April 1962), NA, RG330, OASD/ISA, Secret and Below General Files, 1962, Box 110, “North Vietnam, 1962, 000.1-92”; Memo, Wood to Harriman, “French Reports from North Viet-Nam” (8 March 1963), NA, RG 59, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, the Vietnam Working Group, Subject Files, 1963–1966, Box 1, “DRV–1963”; Cable, Saigon to State, “Visit of French Parliamentary Delegation to Hanoi (February 7–12) [as reported by the British Consul General in Hanoi],” LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 3 [1 of 2], “Vietnam, vol. VI (3/64), Memos [1 of 2], # 71–99a,” #99 and 99a; Memorandum of conversation, Beachner and Flowerree with Rameril (Canadian Permanent Representative, Hanoi) (1 April 1963), NA, RG 59, Entry 5305, Box 1, “DRV–1963.”

⁴ CIA, National Intelligence Survey, “North Vietnam” (July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 8, Folder 2, #87a.

⁵ Richard Schultz, Jr., *The Secret War against Hanoi: The Untold Story of Spies, Saboteurs, and Covert Warriors in North Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), pp. 82–84. See also: Sedgwick Tourison, *Secret Army, Secret War: Washington's Tragic Spy Operation in North Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995); Memo, Hilsman to Harriman, “CIA Memo on Operation in North Vietnam, dated 25 Sept. 1962” (28 Sept 1962), JFKL, Newman Papers, Box 9, “Sept. 1962: 18–28.”

⁶ Between 1962 and 1964 the CIA staged a total of 36 U-2 missions over North and South Vietnam. Gregory Pedlow and Donald Welzenbach, *The CIA and the U-2 Program, 1954–1974* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998), pp. 221–222, 130–134. See also: Memo, Carroll (DIA) to USIB, “Ad Hoc Committee Report and Recommendations Relating to Disclosure of US SIGINT Success Against North Vietnam” (13 June 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 48, Folder 1, #9a.

for propaganda purposes and covered only a limited range of subjects.⁷

This lack of reliable information was recognised by the intelligence community. The unusual “Note” at the beginning of SNIE “The Outlook for North Vietnam” (4 March 1964) warned the reader: “Firm information about North Vietnam is extremely sparse. Accordingly, analysis of economic and political situation and especially of the size, structure, and capabilities of the armed forces is extremely difficult, and the judgments below must be considered tentative.”⁸ Four months later, the problem was discussed in more detail in the “Comments on Principal Sources” section at the end (p. 65) of the National Intelligence Survey “North Vietnam” (July 1964). It stated that “Available information on North Vietnam is generally reliable in the transportation, telecommunication, and military geographic fields, although there are a number of deficiencies. Data on the armed forces and on sociological and political topics are very limited and difficult to evaluate qualitatively. Economic data vary in both reliability and quantity.”⁹ The central challenge for analysts, therefore, was to exploit limited data to narrow the range of possibilities and draw sound conclusions, while also communicating uncertainty to policymakers.

2. Unfavourable trends

The intelligence community could at least identify key developments – in regard to politics, economy, internal security, military capabilities and external relations – pertinent to the intentions and capabilities of the DRV.

Politics was one of the most difficult subjects for the intelligence community because of the lack of information on the North Vietnamese politburo and the difficulty of analysing the character and thinking of leading figures in the Communist Party.¹⁰ Historians have long been debated whether Ho Chi Minh was essentially communist or nationalist.¹¹ The CIA did not agonise over this question:

⁷ See the “List of Sources” section on page 23 of Cable, Saigon to State, “Compilation of Targets of the DRV’s Five-Year Plan (1961-1965) and 1963 Plan” (16 Sept 1963), NA, RG 84, Vietnam, Saigon Embassy; General Records, 1956–63, Box 7, “350 Internal Political Affairs – DRV.”

⁸ SNIE 14.3-64, “The Outlook for North Vietnam” (4 March 1964), the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 19 Feb 2007.

⁹ This document – probably the most comprehensive study of North Vietnam in 1964 – was prepared jointly by the CIA and the DIA. CIA, National Intelligence Survey, “North Vietnam” (July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 8, Folder 2, #87a.

¹⁰ For the difficulty of analyzing national leaders, see: Thomas Omestad, “Psychology and the CIA: Leaders on the Couch,” *Foreign Policy*, 95 (Summer 1994), pp. 105-122.

¹¹ For this debate, see for example: Jean Lacouture, *Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography*, trans. Peter Wiles (New York: Random House, 1968); William Duiker, “In Search of Ho Chi Minh” in Marilyn Young and Robert Buzzanco eds., *A Companion to the Vietnam War* (Maldon: Blackwell, 2002); Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*, trans. Claire

it simply observed that “The Party is led to a large extent by highly nationalistic Marxist-Leninists who founded the Indochinese Communist Party in the 1930s...The leaders of the Lao Dong Party are dedicated Communists who believe that Vietnamese national aspirations can be furthered most effectively by close alliance with other Communist states.”¹² Rather, the Agency seemed more interested in the diversity of opinion and the occasionally intense power struggle among the ruling elites. Although the unchallenged status of Ho Chi Minh, then in his mid-seventies, provided a façade of unity and stability, the party hierarchy was thought to contain multiple sources of conflict. This included “personal rivalries (like the 1950 dispute between Vo Nguyen Giap and Truong Chinh)...regional origins (in which northerners oppose southerners), [and] policy orientation (in which the moderates oppose the extremists and the pro-Chinese oppose the pro-Soviets).”¹³ This raised the possibility of political instability after the death or retirement of Ho Chi Minh. “Ho has successfully kept these rival groups under control,” SNIE 14.3-64 (March 1964) pointed out, “but when he leaves the scene these rivalries are almost certain to create serious difficulties within the Party and perhaps instability within the country...the succession is unlikely to be smooth and might be violent.”¹⁴ Of more immediate importance, however, was the growing prominence of the pro-Chinese hard-liners (including Le Duan, Truong Chinh and Nguyen Chi Thanh) at the expense of relatively moderate pragmatists (such as General Giap and Pham Van Dong),¹⁵ which was discussed in the CIA’s Special Report “Extremist Influence in North Vietnamese Party” (8 November 1963).¹⁶

The North Vietnamese economy seemed easier and more straightforward to analyse due to its relatively quantifiable nature and the greater availability of information. It was clear that despite rapid growth since the late 1950s the DRV had “largely an agrarian economy with only a small industrial sector.” Data suggested that the per capita GNP in 1963 stood at about \$75, which was “among

Duiker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), especially “Epilogue: A Man at the Interface between Two Worlds,” pp. 183-187.

¹² CIA, National Intelligence Survey, “North Vietnam” (July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 8, Folder 2, #87a

¹³ CIA, National Intelligence Survey, “North Vietnam” (July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 8, Folder 2, #87a. SNIE in March 1964, however, placed Le Duan in another grouping whose political orientation was “less easily identified.” SNIE 14.3-64, “The Outlook for North Vietnam” (4 March 1964), p.4, the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 19 Feb 2007.

¹⁴ SNIE 14.3-64, “The Outlook for North Vietnam” (4 March 1964), p.4, the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 19 Feb 2007.

¹⁵ CIA, Special Report, “Extremist Influence in North Vietnamese Party” (8 Nov 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 202, “Vietnam, General, 11/6/63–11/15/63, CIA Reports,” #10.

¹⁶ CIA/OCI, Special Report, “Extremist Influence in North Vietnamese Party” (8 Nov 1963), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 202, “Vietnam, General, 11/6/63–11/15/63, CIA Reports,” #10.

the lowest in the world.” It was estimated that about 76% of the labour force was engaged in agriculture compared to less than 10% in industry, and that 80% of the industrial work force was producing handicrafts.¹⁷ While the expansion of heavy industry was a primary objective of the Five-Year Plan (1961–1965), the sector had failed to establish itself as a driving force for economic development.¹⁸ “North Vietnam is far from being an economical producer of these industrial goods,” the CIA concluded in October 1964, “the economy is paying a heavy cost for the prestige of producing these ‘symbols’ of economic development and advanced technology.”¹⁹ The faltering process of industrialisation under the Five-Year Plan was due in part to the severe agricultural shortfalls between 1960 and 1963. “This will mean,” the Agency explained in mid-1963, “a continuation of the tight food situation – near the subsistence level – which has prevailed for several years.”²⁰ The poor harvest in the early 1960s and the rudimentary state of its industry made the North Vietnamese economy dependent upon foreign aid from other communist countries. Such assistance was estimated to be more than \$956 million from 1955 through 1963, of which Communist China contributed about 48% and the USSR about 39 %.²¹

The chronic economic hardship pointed to the possibility of internal security problems. Armed resistance against the communist regime or its policies was not uncommon in the 1950s. “One of the most spectacular outbreaks of dissidence,” the CIA noted, “occurred in 1956 in a largely Catholic area of Nghe An Province where the peasants revolted against land reform extremes.” In contrast, the food shortage in the early 1960s showed little sign of inviting “anything other than isolated acts of reprisal against government procurement policies.” By then the potential for dissidence among the 700,000–800,000 Catholics and the two million or so members of non-Vietnamese ethnic minorities had been significantly curtailed. At the same time the regime had intensified its efforts to “reach and

¹⁷ CIA, National Intelligence Survey, “North Vietnam” (July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 8, Folder 2, #87a. See also: CIA/RR, Economic Research Aid “Labor Supply and Employment in North Vietnam, 1955–61” (July 1962), NA, CREST 79S01046A000800130001-9.

¹⁸ SNIE 14.3-64, “The Outlook for North Vietnam” (4 March 1964), p. 6, the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 19 Feb 2007.

¹⁹ CIA, Intelligence Brief, “Machine Tools in North Vietnam: White Elephant or Blueprint for Industrialization?” (Oct 1964), NA, CREST 79T01003A002100110001-5.

²⁰ CIA, CIM, “Implication of North Vietnam’s Poor Agricultural Outlook” (30 Sept 1963), NA, CREST 79T00429A001200030031-0. The agricultural output, however, improved sharply in 1964. CIA, Special Report, “Popular Attitudes and Internal Security in North Vietnam” (4 Dec 1964), NA, CREST 79-00927A004700040002-7.

²¹ CIA, National Intelligence Survey, “North Vietnam” (July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 8, Folder 2, #87a. See also the chart on: CIA, “The Effects of Soviet and Chinese Involvement in the War on the Vietnamese Communists” (1 April 1965), p.II-4, the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 19 Feb 2007.

control virtually every North Vietnamese citizen” through a combination of measures, including a massive internal security apparatus, a network of informers, strict control over popular movement and compulsory membership in mass organisations. On top of this, the start of covert U.S. sabotage operations (OPLAN 34A) in late 1963 reportedly prompted the DRV to expand its local militias and neighbourhood security organisations. While those steps seemed “primarily designed to bolster defense against external attack,” as the Agency observed, “they also resulted in tightened control over the local population.” This process was probably facilitated by U.S. air strikes against the DRV on 6 August 1964 following the Gulf of Tonkin incident, which, according to a CIA report, engendered an “outburst of patriotism” among the North Vietnamese population. By late 1964, all these developments led the Agency to conclude that “there appears to be little prospect of any significant internal dissidence or any successful program of subversion directed from abroad in the predictable future.”²²

Nor was the North Vietnamese military – the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) – an easy target despite the huge military imbalance in favour of the United States. Firstly, intelligence suggested that the PAVN’s capability was based upon its army, which had an estimated strength of about 215,000 men (with a backup of a 500,000-strong militia or trained reserve) compared to 2,500 for the navy and 500 for the air force.²³ While the navy remained “primarily a coastal defense capability” and the air force was still “in the initial stage of development,”²⁴ the army had steadily built up its strength since the mid-1940s. “Equipped with modern conventional weapons,” the DIA concluded, “the army is the most experienced and effective fighting force native to southeast Asia.” This suggests that fighting the ground forces would be crucial but costly for any serious effort by the Pentagon to destroy the PAVN. Secondly, U.S. intelligence on the PAVN – except for its large-scale military installations and infrastructure²⁵ –

²² CIA, Special Report “Popular Attitudes and Internal Security in North Vietnam” (4 Dec 1964), NA, CREST 79-00927A004700040002-7.

²³ CIA, National Intelligence Survey, “North Vietnam” (July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 8, Folder 2, #87a. The section on the North Vietnamese military was completed by the DIA. The CIA’s figures in December 27 1963 were: 223,000 men for the army and 2,500 to 5,000 men each for the navy and the air force. CIA, Special Report, “North Vietnamese Military Establishment” (27 Dec 1963), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 48, Folder 1, #22.

²⁴ CIA, National Intelligence Survey, “North Vietnam” (July 1964) LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 8, Folder 2, #87a. The section on the North Vietnamese military was completed by the DIA.

²⁵ Washington had extensive information on large-scale military facilities and infrastructure within the DRV. Already in December 1962, a “number of highly reliable sources” allowed the CIA to discuss such objects as airfields, military barracks and border outposts. By March 1963, the Agency was able to report, for example, the activation of a new airfield at Kep Ha, four piston engine fighters at the Cat Bi airfield, the general activities of highway and rail networks and an alleged biological warfare research facility just west of Thanh Hoa. Continuing surveillance throughout the rest of 1963 and 1964 kept

remained weak and outdated. “Information on many aspects of the North Vietnamese armed forces is lacking and available information is often vague,” the CIA admitted in 1964, “Since the end of the war in Indochina in 1954...there has been a drastic decrease in intelligence collection capabilities. Conclusions, therefore, are based on knowledge acquired during 1946–54, modified by comparatively little subsequent information.”²⁶ Finally, there was a marked improvement in the PAVN’s air defence capability from mid-1964 to 1965. Until early 1964, the PAVN was thought to have no combat aircraft and no robust anti-aircraft capability, nor an effective air control and warning system.²⁷ As the CIA predicted in late 1963²⁸ and confirmed shortly thereafter, North Vietnam made a successful effort to mitigate this weakness through support from China and the USSR. The agreement between Beijing and Hanoi in July 1964 appeared to accelerate the reinforcement of the air force in southern China, which could be used to provide air defence for the Hanoi-Haiphong area.²⁹ Then, negotiations with the USSR in late 1964 led to the deployment of Soviet surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) to the DRV in 1965, which, according to the DRV’s official figures, were

policymakers informed of further developments, notably the reconstruction of rail lines toward the border with South Vietnam. Memo, [probably CIA to DCI], on developments in North Vietnam and the adjacent borders of China as of 27 Dec 1962 (29 Dec 1962), NA, CREST 89B00569R000200080047-4; Memo, CIA to DCI, “Preliminary Evaluation of Situation Summary on Developments in North Vietnam and Adjacent Areas of China as of 27 Dec 1962” (29 Dec 1962), NA, CREST 89B00569R000200080018-6; Memo, CIA to DCI, “Preliminary Evaluation of Situation Summary on Developments in North Vietnam and the Laos Corridor during the Period 22 February to 1 March 1963” (4 March 1963), NA, CREST 79T00429A001300020001-3; CIA, Current Support Brief, “North Vietnam Reconstructs the Rail Line Toward South Vietnam” (April 1964), NA, CREST 79T01003A001900240001-4; CIA, Intelligence Brief, “North Vietnam Continues to Construct Bridges to the Border” (Nov 1964), NA, CREST 79T01003A002100180001-8.

²⁶ CIA, National Intelligence Survey, “North Vietnam” (July 1964) LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 8, Folder 2, #87a. SNIE 14.3-64 also noted, “There is evidence that the army underwent considerable reorganization in 1960-1961 and that some of this involved “brigading” units formerly structured as divisions, but the details of and reasons for this reorganization remain obscure.” SNIE 14.3-64, “The Outlook for North Vietnam” (4 March 1964), p. 8, the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 19 Feb 2007.

²⁷ CIA, Special Report, “North Vietnamese Military Establishment” (27 Dec 1963), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 48, Folder 1, #22.; SNIE 14.3-64, “The Outlook for North Vietnam” (4 March 1964), p. 10, the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 19 Feb 2007.

²⁸ CIA, Special Report, “North Vietnamese Military Establishment” (27 Dec 1963), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 48, Folder 1, #22.

²⁹ By July 1964, for example, Beijing’s reinforcement of its air force in southern China, according to the CIA, amounted to about 185 jet fighters and a “radar net of some 36 stations within 200 miles of the Vietnamese border.” Four months later, the information on a new airfield in southern China led the INR to warn: “This airfield construction, taken together with recent deployments of Chincom jet fighters to South China – including over half of their MIG-19 inventory – strongly suggests that the Chinese may be preparing to provide air defense for the Hanoi-Haiphong area against possible US air strikes. CIA/OCI, Special Report, “Chinese Air Defense Capabilities in Southeast Asia” (17 July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 48, Folder 1, #2; Memo, INR/Hughes to Rusk, “New Chincom Airfield Near North Vietnam” (28 Nov 1964), JFKL, NSF, Country, Box 202, “Vietnam, Meeting of the Principals Book” #11a.

to shoot down 834 U.S. airplanes in 1965.³⁰

The support from China and the USSR – in the areas of the economy, military and diplomacy – appeared increasingly solid and irreversible, particularly in the context of the rising tension between China and the USSR since the late 1950s (the Sino-Soviet split).³¹ It was already clear in the early 1960s that, with Hanoi remaining more or less neutral and Beijing and Moscow each trying to present itself as the champion of “national liberation movements,” the Sino-Soviet tension was working for North Vietnamese interests. “The dispute between the USSR and Communist China has benefited North Vietnam by encouraging a greater display of concern for its economic well being on the part of the disputants,” the CIA judged in March 1961.³² Almost a year later, the same conclusion was repeated in a more detailed, chronological survey of the subject.³³ The situation became less predictable in mid-1963 when the DRV abandoned its neutral position and began to support China on most of the major issues in the ideological struggle between Beijing and Moscow. Even then, however, it was evident that the USSR was reluctant to criticise the DRV and that the DRV, for its part, remained shrewd enough to maintain its ties with the USSR.³⁴ This prudence on the part of the DRV paid dividends in late 1964 when the new leaders in the Kremlin – Leonid Brezhnev (the General Secretary of the Communist Party) and Alexei Kosygin (the Premier of the Soviet Union) – decided to commit their

³⁰ John Prados, *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (New York: Johnson Wiley & Sons, 1998), pp.132-133. See also: Spencer Tucker ed., *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social and Military History* (Denver: ABC-Clío, 1998), pp. 666-667.

³¹ For the economic and military aid by the USSR and China, see: CIA, “The Effects of Soviet and Chinese Involvement in the War on the Vietnamese Communists” (1 April 1965), p. II-4, the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 19 Feb 2007. For China and the Vietnam conflict, see for example: Qian Zhia “China’s Crucial Role,” in Robert McMahon, ed., *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, 3rd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003); Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Xiaoming Zhang, ‘The Vietnam War, 1964-1969: A Chinese Perspective,’ *Journal of Military History*, vol. 60, no. 4 (Oct 1996); Chen Jian, “China’s involvement of in the Vietnam War, 1964-1969,” *China Quarterly*, no. 141 (June 1995). For the USSR and the Vietnam conflict, see for example: Ilya Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996); Ilya Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954-1963* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2003); Mari Olsen, *Soviet-Vietnam Relations and the Role of China, 1949-1964* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

³² CIA, Current Support Brief, “Increase in Bloc Aid to North Vietnam” (2 March 1961), NA, CREST, 79T01003A001000110002-6.

³³ Memo, Bridgeham, “North Vietnam and Sino-Soviet Relations” (6 Feb 1962), NA, RG330, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (OASD/ISA), Secret and Below General Files, 1962, Box 110, “North Vietnam, 1962, 000.1-92.”

³⁴ CIA, National Intelligence Survey, “North Vietnam” (July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 8, Folder 2, #87a; SNIE “The Impact of the Sino-Soviet Dispute on North Vietnam and its Policies” (26 June 1963), especially paragraph 12, the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 19 Feb 2007.

country firmly to the defence of the DRV. Hanoi's positive response to the new Soviet policy was confirmed in November 1964 when its delegations visited Moscow and the event was loudly celebrated in both the Soviet and the North Vietnamese media. In early February 1965, Kosygin made a return visit to Hanoi, confirming what the CIA called a "basic Soviet decision to contest the spread of Chinese Communist influence in the Far East."³⁵

From these trends and developments together with the NLF's success below the 17th parallel, it was possible to infer that the DRV would not easily abandon its hard-line policy toward the conflict and its aspiration for national reunification. The knowledge about the insignificance of the industrial sector in the North Vietnamese economy, in particular, could bring into question Walt Rostow's argument – based on his "modernization theory" – that air strikes against its industrial facilities could force the DRV to stop its support for the NLF because Hanoi would be keen to defend its economic development.³⁶ Furthermore, intelligence on the strengths of the North Vietnamese military indicated that the JCS argument in November 1964 in favour of air strikes (as well as the Chiefs' contingency plan CINCPAC OPLAN 32-64, which included a "grand attack northward to seize, liberate and occupy North Vietnam"³⁷) underestimated the difficulties of fighting the largely army-based PAVN supported by China and the USSR.

3. Uncertainties

At the same time, there remained elements of uncertainty and sources of optimism regarding the outcomes of military action against the DRV. First of all, some of the developments mentioned earlier (including the improvement of the PAVN's air defence and the rapprochement between the DRV and the USSR) could not be confirmed until late 1964. This means that policy inquiries during mid-1964 into the probable consequences of air strikes against North Vietnam, which shaped the policy debates during the rest of 1964, were based on an assessment more favourable than the above analysis indicates. In addition, the real implications of some developments remained uncertain until the war actually broke out. (For instance, while the increase in the number of fighter jets in southern China and the

³⁵ CIA, Special Memorandum, "The Dimensions of Kosygin's Trip" (5 Feb 1965), CREST 80B01676R000300190017-3.

³⁶ Memo, Rostow to Rusk, "Southeast Asia and China" (10 Jan 1964), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 24, "Southeast Asia, 1961–1966, Vietnam, General, 1/64–2/64."

³⁷ Memo, "Part VI (Analysis of Option B), Section F. Likely Developments and Problems," LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 3, #4.

DRV could be confirmed, the quality of their pilots remained difficult to estimate.³⁸⁾

Secondly, intelligence materials also mentioned the weaknesses of the DRV and the advantages for the United States. Of particular importance here was the fact that, according to the CIA, the DRV's main armaments (heavy firepower, transportation facilities and other standardised equipment) were almost entirely supplied by Communist China and the USSR, rather than manufactured within the DRV. (North Vietnam could produce relatively simple weapons, such as mortars, grenades, mines and small arms.) This could have been seen as a problem for Washington, as U.S. attacks against the arsenal within the DRV would be less damaging to the PAVN. However, the CIA judged this as a major problem for the DRV, arguing that "North Vietnam's major military weaknesses derive, directly or indirectly, from its deficient technological and industrial base...we do not believe that Hanoi could sustain a large-scale military undertaking for any considerable length of time without substantial continuing assistance from external sources."³⁹

Thirdly, the absence of reliable informers within, and the conflicting signals from, Hanoi, Beijing and Moscow, kept Washington speculating on their exact intentions. Intelligence products on Beijing and Moscow repeatedly argued that, contrary to the belligerent tone of their public statements, the leaders of these two countries were keen to avoid a direct U.S. intervention in the Vietnam conflict. "Despite their propaganda commitment to militancy," the CIA noted in 1963, "the Chinese have shown considerable caution where the risks of US involvement are high."⁴⁰ While this kind of optimistic comment on China became rare in 1964, the CIA continued to predict well into late 1964 that, while warning Washington against a further escalation, Moscow would indicate to Beijing and Hanoi that "in any enlarged confrontation the USSR might publicly side against them, as in the Sino-Indian border war."⁴¹

³⁸ CIA/OCI, Special Report, "Chinese Air Defense Capabilities in Southeast Asia" (17 July 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 48, Folder 1, #2.

³⁹ SNIE 14.3-64, "The Outlook for North Vietnam" (4 March 1964), paragraph 24, the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 19 Feb 2007.

⁴⁰ CIA, Current Intelligence Memorandum, "North Vietnamese and Chinese Communist Views on the War in South Vietnam" (25 Sept 1963), NA, CREST 79T00429A001200030028-4.

⁴¹ Memo, CIA to DCI, "Soviet Foreign Policies in the Coming Months" (9 Oct 1964), NA, CREST 79R00904A001100010019-8. See also: CIA, Special Memorandum, "The Dimensions of Kosygin's Trip" (5 Feb 1965), paragraph 10, NA, CREST 80B01676R000300190017-3.

4. Probable consequences of air strikes

It was partly due to these uncertainties that the estimative materials in 1964 did not clearly challenge the case for air strikes against the DRV, even though some analysts had doubt about escalation when Rostow began to advocate that option.⁴² In 1964, the intelligence community produced two national estimates on the probable consequences of military actions: SNIE 50-2-64 “Probable Consequences of Certain US Actions with Respect to Vietnam and Laos” (25 May 1964)⁴³ which was “requested by the State Department...apparently on a rush basis only a few days before the actual publication date”⁴⁴; and SNIE 10-3-64 “Probable Communist Reactions to Certain Possible US/GVN Courses of Actions” (9 October 1964)⁴⁵ which was possibly based on a CIA memo circulated in late July 1964.⁴⁶

Despite some differences, each of those documents presented a similar set of arguments with regard to the probable consequences of gradually intensifying attacks by the United States and the GVN against the DRV. They predicted, firstly, that the initial responses of the DRV would be to attempt to dissuade the United States through a combination of moves (such as some concessions to U.S. demands, attempts to mobilize world opinion against U.S. policy, actions designed to underline its determination, and instructions to the Southern insurgents to refrain from dramatic new attacks). Secondly, if those initial attempts failed and the United States continued to attack the DRV, there was a substantial danger that Hanoi would embark on all-out attacks on the RVN in the hope of bringing down the Saigon regime. In this case, China would not want to become involved in the conflict (though it might use its air force to defend the DRV). The USSR would be “increasingly concerned to bring an end to the crisis...would probably make plain to Hanoi and Peiping that they could look for no substantial Soviet support...[and]

⁴² Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*, p. 50.

⁴³ SNIE 50-2-64, “Probable Consequences of Certain US Actions with Respect to Vietnam and Laos” (25 May 1964), the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 2 Feb 2007.

⁴⁴ Memo, unknown author to Carver, “Chicago Sun-Times reference to NIE of May 25, 1964” (28 June 1971), NA, CREST 80R01720R001200030060-6.

⁴⁵ SNIE 10-3-64, “Probable Communist Reactions to Certain Possible US/GVN Courses of Actions” (9 October 1964), the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 2 Feb 2007. For the reactions to this SNIE see: Memo, Westmoreland to Taylor, “SNIE 10-3-64, 9 Oct 1964” (13 Nov 1964), LBJL, Westmoreland Papers, Box 3, Folder 6, #117.

⁴⁶ Memo, CIA to McCone, “Probable Communist Reactions to Certain US or US-Sponsored Courses of Action in Vietnam and Laos” (27 July 1964); Memo, CIA to Johnson, “Probable Communist Reactions to Certain US or US-Sponsored Courses of Action in Vietnam and Laos” (n.d.); Memo, Elder to M. Bundy (28 July 1964), all documents in LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 6, Folder 5, #209, #210 and #210a.

would seek to augment international pressures on the US to bring it to the conference table.” Thirdly, however, the most likely response of Hanoi to continuing air strikes by the United States was to order the NLF to stop its military attacks for the time being and to press for a negotiated ceasefire in the RVN in an attempt to avoid the destruction of its military facilities and industrial sector. (In the second SNIE in October, the INR disagreed with this judgement, arguing that the former scenario, i.e. the intensification of Viet Cong attacks, was more likely.)⁴⁷

What those estimates failed to examine was the worst case scenario which actually unfolded after February 1965: that the DRV and the NLF intensified infiltration and attacks against the RVN; that Washington could not find a diplomatic route out of the crisis; and that the deteriorating situation in the RVN would increase the pressure on the U.S. government to introduce its ground troops to save the GVN.

⁴⁷ SNIE 50-2-64, “Probable Consequences of Certain US Actions with Respect to Vietnam and Laos” (25 May 1964); SNIE 10-3-64, “Probable Communist Reactions to Certain Possible US/GVN Courses of Actions” (9 Oct 1964), both documents at the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 2 Feb 2007.

Chapter 8

Choosing Air Strikes, April 1964 - February 1965

As discussed in Chapter 5, Vietnam policy had already been steered toward escalation in early 1964 when policymakers rejected a re-examination of strategy in the RVN, accepted the domino theory as an official policy (and thereby ruling out withdrawal), and began to see external support for the NLF as the main problem for the GVN. The last three chapters have also shown that the intelligence community either endorsed, or failed to present a clear challenge to, the three key assumptions underlying the case for air strikes: that a loss of Vietnam would lead to a domino-like spread of the communist influence in Southeast Asia (Chapter 5); that a significant reduction in infiltration and improvement in morale in friendly forces could turn the tide of the conflict in the RVN (Chapter 6); and that air strikes would either lead the DRV to cease infiltration or at least allow the United States to start negotiations with Hanoi from a position of strength (Chapter 6).

It was against this backdrop that between April and October 1964 a growing number of policymakers came to support air strikes against the DRV despite some officers in the State Department and the CIA remaining sceptical of the proposal. The interdepartmental Working Group in November 1964 exposed, but did not reconcile, disagreements on most of the key issues, including the situation in South Vietnam, the importance of the RVN for the U.S. national security, and the probable results of three key policy options. The uncertainty over, and the opposition against, escalation remained from December 1964 to January 1965, but the government eventually decided to start a military campaign against North Vietnam in early February 1965.

Throughout the policy debates of 1964 to early 1965, it was the non-factual elements in Vietnam policy – including the domino metaphor, Rostow’s “modernization theory,” and the belief that bold action by the United States could have a positive, catalytic effect on the counterinsurgency – that pushed the United States towards escalation. At the same time, however, the absence of robust fact-based assessments of the complex reality in Vietnam and surrounding areas at least facilitated the relatively simplistic ideas to dominate Vietnam policy in 1964.

1. Escalation: supporters and sceptics (April - October 1964)

During mid-1964, the main issue for the inter-departmental policy discussions was

the possibility of taking action against the DRV. This was the main subject of the Sullivan committee (March – April),¹ two war games (SIGMA I-64 in April and SIGMA II-64 in September)² and two SNIE (May and October) mentioned earlier.³ Although President Johnson made clear that he was not going to escalate the U.S. commitment during the presidential campaign, support for air strikes spread among senior policymakers. Already in November 1963, Ambassador Lodge had already suggested that the threat of air strikes (rather than actual military action) could force the DRV to stop its support for the Viet Cong,⁴ and in January 1964 Walt Rostow began to call for “a direct political-military showdown with Hanoi.”⁵ By mid-1964, the JCS had decided to back military intervention despite the reservations of the Army and the Navy.⁶ John McCone was not as enthusiastic, but apparently supported some form of intervention, telling the President in May that “If we go into North Vietnam, we should go in hard and not limit our action to pin pricks.”⁷ The possibility of a congressional resolution in support of action against the DRV was also discussed from May onward,⁸ leading to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in August 1964.⁹ John McNaughton, William Bundy and John Mendenhall began to develop new, detailed scenarios for U.S.

¹ For the Sullivan committee, see: LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 48, Folder 1; LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 2 Folders 5 and 6.

² For SIGMA I-64 in April, see: LBJL, NSF, Agency File, Box 30, “JCS – War Games, vol. I [1]” and “JCS – War Games, vol. I [2].” For SIGMA II-64 in September 1964, see: LBJL, NSF, Agency File, Box. 30. “JCS – War Games, vol. II [1]” and “JCS – War Games, vol. II [2].”

³ SNIE 50-2-64, “Probable Consequences of Certain US Actions with Respect to Vietnam and Laos” (25 May 1964); SNIE 10-3-64, “Probable Communist Reactions to Certain Possible US/GVN Courses of Actions” (9 Oct 1964), both documents at the CIA, FOIA Electronic Reading Room <www.foia.cia.gov> accessed 2 Feb 2007.

⁴ According to Harriman, “Lodge’s idea was that when SVN made sufficient progress and clearly had the upper hand, we should first get word to NVN, in the form of a plant, that we planned an air strike if NVN did not stop their support of the Viet Cong, and then develop some method by which, after they were in a fearful mood, direct contact would be made which would get them to stop support in return for our abandoning plans for striking NVN. Lodge believes NVN both fears American air attack and having to call on Red China for support, as NVN fears they would never be able to get Red China out.” Memorandum of Conversation, Harriman with Lodge, “North Vietnam” (24 Nov 1963), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 1, Folder 2, #73b.

⁵ Memo, Rostow to Rusk, “Southeast Asia and China” (10 Jan 1964), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 24, “Southeast Asia, 1961–1966, Vietnam, General, 1/64–2/64.”

⁶ Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, p.302; Bruce Palmer, “US Intelligence and Vietnam,” *Studies in Intelligence*, vol. 28 (1984), p. 33.

⁷ Memo, “Summary Record of the Meeting on Southeast Asia on 24 May 1964, 11:00 AM,” LBJL, NSF, NSC History, Box 38, Folder 1, #10.

⁸ Memo, Cater to M. Bundy (23 May 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 1, #10; Memo, W. Bundy, “Memorandum on the Southeast Asia Situation: Probable Developments and the Case for a Congressional Resolution” (12 June 1964), LBJL, NSF, NSC History, Box 39, Folder 1, #9.

⁹ For the alleged distortion of intelligence on the Gulf of Tonkin incidents, see for Chapter 1, footnote 14.

intervention during the autumn of 1964.¹⁰

There were at least two major cross-currents to this central development. Firstly, Edward Lansdale (a leading expert on unconventional warfare who in mid-1964 was wasting his talents as Richard Reuter's assistant in the Food for Peace Program) and officers in the CIA's Directorate of Plans were trying to show that the best way to improve the situation was through a radically different strategy within South Vietnam, placing more emphasis on the political and psychological dimensions. Lansdale's memo "A Catalyst Team for Vietnam" (June 1964) and his article in *Foreign Affairs*, "Do We Understand Revolution?" (October 1964), proposed a less conventional approach to counterinsurgency, similar to the one that he used in the Philippines and South Vietnam in the 1940s and the 1950s.¹¹ Lansdale's proposals had limited influence in the administration, as he stayed outside the Vietnam policy circle and, as Forrestal observed, he was not "well regarded at the highest levels of the Pentagon or of the CIA."¹² Nevertheless, Lansdale's view carried some weight in the CIA's operational branch (Directorate of Plans). Referring to Lansdale's works, an officer (whom William Colby called an "angry young man" to protect his identity) tried to show in October that the counterinsurgency could be improved by more imaginative, unconventional methods, centred upon an effort to influence the young, revolutionary elements among the students, the peasants and the GVN officers. "Through these young revolutionists," he argued, "we must establish a parallel hierarchy, in the same sense as the communist leaders who seek to monopolize the revolution."¹³

¹⁰ See for example: Memo, McNaughton, "Plan of Action for South Vietnam (2nd draft)" (3 Sept 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 2, #2 & 2a; Memo, McNaughton, "Aims and Options in Southeast Asia (1st Draft)" (13 Oct 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 2, Folder 6, #35; Memo, Mandenhall, "Scenario for Action in Southeast Asia" (3 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 2, #4; Memo, McNaughton, "Action for South Vietnam (1st Draft)" (5 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 2, Folder 6, #34; Memo, W Bundy and McNaughton, "Courses of Action in Southeast Asia" (26 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 2, Folder 6, #33.

¹¹ Memo, Lansdale, "A Catalyst Team for Vietnam" (12 June 1964), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 24, "Southeast Asia, 1961–1964, Vietnam, 'A Catalyst Team for Vietnam' 6/12/64"; Edward Lansdale, "Viet Nam: Do We Understand Revolution?" *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 43 (Oct 1964). On 24 December, Lansdale also sent a memo to McGeorge Bundy as "a little Christmas remembrance" to express his view that the administration should set aside personal issues and permit the return to South Vietnam of "priceless working Americans" (such as Lucien Conein, Rufus Phillips and John Vann) who had "rare rapport with the Vietnamese but whose help has been denied by fellow Americans." Memo, Lansdale to M. Bundy "Vietnam" (24 Dec 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 11, Folder 5, #201. See also: Memo, Forrestal to Bundy, "Senator Humphrey's Memoranda on South Vietnam" (10 June 1964), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 24, "Southeast Asia, 1961–1964, Vietnam, General, 6/64–8/64."

¹² Memo, Forrestal to Bundy, "Senator Humphrey's Memoranda on South Vietnam" (10 June 1964), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 24, "Southeast Asia, 1961–1964, Vietnam, General, 6/64–8/64."

¹³ Memo, Colby to Forrestal, "Appraisal of American Posture in Vietnam" (16 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 3, #14 and 14a ; Memo, "Commentary on Special

Secondly, some policymakers in the State Department, notably Robert Johnson and George Ball, suggested that the United States needed to consider a diplomatic settlement. Deeply sceptical about the Khanh regime and the merits of escalation, Johnson told Rostow in July, “We are thus left with two policy alternatives, both of which have proven to be the hardest to accept – a negotiated solution or direct, substantial U.S. involvement on the ground in Southeast Asia.”¹⁴ Arguably the most comprehensive case against air strikes around that time can be found in Ball’s memo on 5 October, which predicted that bombing would not force the DRV to give up its support for the NLF, that action against the North would not improve the situation in the RVN (and, therefore, would not strengthen the bargaining power of the United States), and that Hanoi and Beijing might intensify their supports for the NLF, a move which would increase the pressure on the U.S. government to introduce its ground troops to save the GVN.¹⁵

2. Disagreement in the William Bundy Working Group (November 1964)

In November, these differences in opinions and assumptions came to the surface during the policy review by an interdepartmental Working Group, which was set up on 1 November (the day before Johnson’s landslide victory in the presidential election). This NSC Working Group was chaired by William Bundy (Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs) and tasked to “work immediately and intensively on a study of future course and alternatives.” Its members (Michael Forrestal from the NSC, Marshall Green and Robert Johnson from the State Department, John McNaughton and Lloyd Mustin from the Pentagon, and Harold Ford from the CIA) were expected to work with other officers within their respective organisations, and Ford was also asked to work with George Fowler (DIA) and Allen Whiting (INR) on intelligence-related questions as a “CIA-DIA-INR intelligence panel.”¹⁶ The key issues discussed by the Working Group included the stakes of the GVN, the situation in South Vietnam and what Bundy thought were the three major policy options available:

- A. Continue on present lines,
- B. Present policies plus a systematic program of military pressures against the north, meshing at some point with negotiation, but with

National Intelligence Estimate 53-2-64” (19 Oct 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 3, #14b.

¹⁴ Memo, Robert Johnson to Rostow, “The Situation in Vietnam and U.S. Policy Alternative” (27 July 1964), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 24, “Southeast Asia, 1961–1964, Vietnam, General, 6/64–8/64.”

¹⁵ Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, pp. 349-351.

¹⁶ Memo, Jonathan Moore (3 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 2, #5b.

pressure actions to be continued until we achieve our central present objectives,

- C. Present policies plus additional forceful measures and military moves, followed by negotiations in which we would seek to maintain a believable threat of still further military pressures but would not actually carry out such pressures to any marked degree during the negotiations.¹⁷

Several drafts were produced for each section during the following weeks before Bundy assembled the final report on 26 November. The report was then discussed by senior policymakers, including Ambassador Taylor, at the NSC meeting on 27 November. The Working Group revealed disagreements on almost all major issues but did not change the view of those who supported escalation (Option B or C).

With regard to the importance of South Vietnam for the U.S. national security, William Bundy and the JCS disagreed on the degree of certainty regarding the domino effect in the event of losing the RVN. Bundy did acknowledge the serious risks that might arise from the loss of Vietnam. Yet he also recognised the uncertainty, pointing out that “there are enough ‘ifs’ and enough possibilities of offsetting action in the above analysis so that it cannot be concluded that the loss of South Vietnam would soon have the totally crippling effect in Southeast Asia and Asia generally.”¹⁸ Lloyd Mustin (JCS) disagreed, arguing that Bundy’s draft “appears to understate rather substantially the gravity to the United States of the possible loss of SVN to the communists” and “appears to overstate rather markedly the magnitude, difficulty, and potential risks in measures by the United States to prevent that loss.”¹⁹

As to the situation in South Vietnam, disagreements remained on two key questions. The first was the urgency of U.S. action needed to avoid a collapse of the war efforts. Gen. Westmoreland (the MACV commander) emphasised some signs and further possibilities of improvement on the military side of the operation²⁰ and was generally “inclined to wait six months to have a firmer base for stronger actions.”²¹ In contrast, Ambassador Taylor felt that the U.S. government could not “count on the situation holding together that long,”

¹⁷ Direct quotation. Memo, W. Bundy, “Project Outline: Working Group on Courses of Action in Southeast Asia” (3 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 2, #5a.

¹⁸ Memo, Mustin “Comment on Part II – US Objectives and Stakes in South Vietnam and Southeast Asia” (10 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 3, #10, 10a.

¹⁹ Memo, Mustin to W. Bundy, “Comment on Part II – US Objectives and Stakes in South Vietnam and Southeast Asia” (10 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 3, #10 and 10a.

²⁰ Memo, Westmoreland to Taylor, “Assessment of the Military Situation” (24 Nov 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 10, Folder 5, #96.

²¹ Memo, W. Bundy, “Memorandum of Meeting on Southeast Asia, November 27, 1964” (27 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #16.

suggesting that “we must do something sooner than this.”²² The second question was the extent to which military action against the DRV would improve the situation in the RVN. The intelligence panel stressed that the key problems were largely internal to South Vietnam, implying that the effects of escalations upon the war effort in the South were limited. As already discussed at the beginning of Chapter 6, the panel insisted that reversal of military trends would be “extremely difficult” because basic problems for the GVN were indigenous and difficult to mitigate.²³ Ambassador Taylor also confessed that, while external actions would have some positive effects on the performance and morale of the GVN, he was “not sure this would be enough really to improve the situation.”²⁴ In fact, according to William Bundy, some of the supporters of Options B and C also conceded that “there is some chance that the GVN would come apart under any Option.”²⁵ In spite of all this, the possibility of improvement in the RVN remained a key justification for taking action against the DRV.²⁶

Option A (the continuation of the existing policy line, which consisted primarily of efforts within South Vietnam and some covert cross-border actions into Laos) was rejected by advocates of escalation (Options B and C) as “doomed.”²⁷ However, Robert Johnson and Rufus Phillips of the State Department, along with George Carver and William Colby of the CIA, tried to show its feasibility and advantages. In response to Robert Johnson’s request for a “free think” piece,²⁸ Carver completed a 20-page memo in favour of Option A on 13

²² Memo, W. Bundy, “Memorandum of Meeting on Southeast Asia, November 27, 1964” (27 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #16. See also: Memo, Taylor “The Current Situation in South Viet-Nam (probably around 24 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #12.

²³ NSC Working Group on Vietnam, “Section I: Intelligence Assessment, the Situation in Vietnam” (24 Nov. 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #9. In fact, the JCS tried to soften those negative comments, arguing that “a very modest change in the government’s favor...may be enough to turn the tide and lead to a successful solution.” Memo, Mustin to W Bundy, “Comment on Draft for Part I of Project Outline on Courses of Action in Southeast Asia – ‘The Situation’” (10 Nov 64), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 2, #16 and 16a; Memo, “Suggested Revisions for Section I, ‘The Situation’” (12 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 2, #25; Memo, Mustin to W Bundy, “Comment on 13 November 1964 Draft for Section I of Project Outline on Courses of Action in Southeast Asia – ‘Intelligence Assessment: The Situation in Vietnam’” (18 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 3, #18.

²⁴ “Memorandum of Meeting on Southeast Asia, November 27, 1964” (27 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #16.

²⁵ Emphasis in the original, Memo, W. Bundy to Rusk, McNamara, McCone, Wheeler, Ball and M Bundy, “Issues Raised by Papers on Southeast Asia” (24 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #10.

²⁶ Memo, W. Bundy, “Summary: Courses of Action in Southeast Asia” (26 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #13.

²⁷ Memo, W. Bundy to Rusk, McNamara, McCone, Wheeler, Ball and M Bundy, “Issues Raised by Papers on Southeast Asia” (24 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #10.

²⁸ Memo, Robert Johnson to W. Bundy, “Case for Option A” (18 Nov 1964), LBJL,

November.²⁹ This was followed by William Colby's decision on 16 November to circulate the aforementioned memo on 19 October written by the "angry young man," which stressed the possibility of re-launching the counterinsurgency along the lines suggested by Lansdale.³⁰ Soon afterward, Robert Johnson circulated his own memo "Case for Option A" (18 November),³¹ and Lansdale's idea was also promoted by Rufus Phillip, who had worked with him in the Philippines.³² Within the CIA, the inquiry into Option A continued, and a study by the Directorate of Plans on 23 November reached a conclusion similar to Carver's, suggesting that support for Option A within the Agency was not confined to a few individuals.³³ Despite differences in details, those documents share the basic assumption that a less conventional strategy could improve the situation more effectively and with far less risk than escalation. Nevertheless, their influence within the Working Group was limited, and William Bundy's final draft on 26 November concluded that "Option A appears to offer little hope of getting Hanoi out or an independent South Vietnam re-established."³⁴

Both Option B and Option C (two types of military actions against the DRV) were questioned by the intelligence panel, which judged that air strikes did not have a good chance of breaking the will of Hanoi.³⁵ The main debate, though, was over the comparative merits of Option B and Option C. The supporters of Option C

Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 3, #19; Forwarding memo, Carver to McCone, "The Possibilities of an Expanded Option A in South Vietnam" (27 Nov 1964), NA, CREST 80R01720R000500010004-8.

²⁹ Draft Memo, Carver, "The Feasibility and Possible Advantages of a Continued Concentration on Counterinsurgency (Option A)" (13 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #2a. See also: George Carver, "The Real Revolution in South Vietnam," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 43, no. 3 (April 1965), pp. 387-408.

³⁰ Memo, Colby to Forrestal, "Appraisal of American Posture in Vietnam" (16 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 3, #14 and 14a; Memo, "Commentary on Special National Intelligence Estimate 53-2-64" (19 Oct 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 3, #14b. In late January 1965, Colby sent his own view to McGeorge Bundy. He stressed the primacy of the political dimension of the counterinsurgency and proposed organisational reform to bring all civilian elements in Saigon (AID, USIS, Peace Corps and the CIA) under a unified leadership. Memo, Colby, "The Political Weapon for Political War," (29 Jan 1965), LBJL, NSF, Agency File, Box 9, Folder 2, #56 and 56a

³¹ Memo, Robert Johnson to W. Bundy, "Case for Option A" (18 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 3, #19.

³² Memo, Rufus Phillips, "United State Policy Options in Vietnam: A Synopsis" (25 Nov 1964), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 24, "Southeast Asia, 1961-1964, Vietnam, General, 9/64-12/64."

³³ Forwarding memo, Colby to Forrestal (27 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #15; Memo, "Option A Plus" (25 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #15a; Forwarding memo, Carver to McCone, "The Possibilities of an Expanded Option A in South Vietnam" (27 Nov 1964), NA, CREST 80R01720R000500010004-8; Memo, CIA "The Feasibility and Possible Advantages of a Continued Concentration on Counterinsurgency (Option A)" (26 Nov 1964), NA, CREST 80R01720R000500010005-7.

³⁴ Report, W. Bundy, "Summary: Courses of Action in Southeast Asia" (26 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #13.

³⁵ The intelligence panel, as quoted in Ranelagh, *CIA*, p. 117.

(the civilian side of the Pentagon and some part of the State Department) assumed that a gradually intensifying aerial campaign would reduce the risk associated with military action (such as China's intervention).³⁶ The advocates of Option B (mainly the JCS), in contrast, insisted that "a sharp, forceful attack from the outset" was more likely to achieve the objectives "with the least probability of enemy miscalculation" and "at the least risk, casualties, and cost" because it would "eliminate DRV combat air capability and reduce US losses on subsequent operations."³⁷

The Working Group's final report on 26 November, as William Bundy apparently intended at the beginning, generally supported Option C. The whole exercise, in the end, failed to unsettle the basic assumptions of the advocates of escalation. Nor did it change their reluctance to take seriously the basic, indigenous problems for the GVN. As William Bundy duly informed policymakers before the NSC meeting on 27 November,³⁸ however, the discussion in the Working Group did reveal the lack of clear consensus and the significant level of uncertainty surrounding military action.

3. Decision under uncertainty (December 1964 - February 1965)

This general uncertainty, together with the limited understanding of the problems in South Vietnam, led the White House to avoid immediate action against the DRV and to send a poorly informed policy instruction to the U.S. mission on 3 December. Ignoring the many problems within South Vietnam identified by the intelligence panel, the cable stated that the recent policy review in Washington "clearly established" that the unsatisfactory progress in counterinsurgency was "the result of two primary causes from which many secondary causes stemmed: first, the governmental instability in Saigon, and the second, the continued reinforcement and direction of the VC by the North Vietnamese Government." Of those two, the cable argued, political stability was of primary importance, since there must be an effective government to conduct successful operations against

³⁶ Memo, W. Bundy, "VII. Analysis of Option C" (13 Nov 64, revised pages 17 Nov 64), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 3, #6; Memo, W. Bundy, "Summary: Courses of Action in Southeast Asia" (26 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #13.

³⁷ Memo JCS to McNamara, "Courses of Action in Southeast Asia" (23 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #6.

³⁸ William Bundy informed senior policymakers of some of the key points of disagreement, and they were discussed at the NSC meeting on 27 November. Memo, W. Bundy to Rusk, McNamara, McCone, Wheeler, Ball and M Bundy, "Issues Raised by Papers on Southeast Asia" (24 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #10; Memo, W. Bundy, "Memorandum of Meeting on Southeast Asia, November 27, 1964" (27 Nov 1964), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 8, Folder 4, #16.

insurgents even after the end of infiltration. Therefore Washington should not expand its operations and commitment until it was sure that the GVN was capable of exploiting the favourable conditions anticipated from such action. Based on those arguments, the cable asked the Embassy to encourage the GVN to demonstrate its ability to conduct its projects by making tangible progress in certain areas (such as the replacement of incompetent commanders, the strengthening of provincial chiefs' authority and measurable progress in the Hop Tac operation around Saigon).³⁹

The situation in South Vietnam, however, deteriorated further during December and January. The NLF continued to expand its military operations, overrunning an ARVN battalion command post near Da Nang in December and mounting a large-scale attack against an ARVN post at Binh Gia over the new year. "[T]he Binh Gia engagement," the JCS analysed, "departs from the usual Viet Cong pattern, in that this force appears in regimental strength...and has chosen to remain in the general area and fight over a relatively long period of time."⁴⁰

Meanwhile, South Vietnamese politics once again became unstable in late December when some of the "Young Turk" generals arrested members of the civilian High National Council (HNC) and replaced the HNC with an Armed Forces Council. This action increased the tension between the GVN and Ambassador Taylor, who opposed the move in a rather rude manner that infuriated many of the general officers.⁴¹ Gen. Khanh's public criticism of what he called the U.S. government's undue interference in South Vietnamese politics prompted the NLF to send a letter to Khanh, praising his "determined declaration against American intervention" and inviting him to "join together and coordinate our efforts to accomplish our supreme mission, which is, to save our homeland."⁴² This was followed by a "quiet coup" on 27 January, in which Khanh ousted Chief of State Suu and Prime Minister Huong.⁴³ All this led McGeorge Bundy to tell the Ambassador on 2 February that "I think we should give a bit of thought to the contingency of a fast deterioration involving a US withdrawal and/or a GVN-DRV

³⁹ Memo, "Instructions from the President to Ambassador Taylor as approved by the President, Dec 3 1964" (3 Dec 1964), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 11, Folder 1, #160a.

⁴⁰ Memo, JCS, "Binh Gia Engagements, 28 December-4 January" (5 Jan 1965), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 12 (1 of 2), Folder 3, #133a.

⁴¹ Cable, Saigon to State (20 Dec 1964) in Gareth Porter, *Vietnam: The Definitive Documentation of Human Decisions*, vol. 2 (London: Heyden, 1979), pp. 336-338.

⁴² Letter, Huynh Tan Phat (Vice-President of the Central Committee of the NLF) to Khanh (28 Dec 1964), in Gareth Porter, *Vietnam: The Definitive Documentation of Human Decisions*, vol. 2 (London: Heyden, 1979), pp. 345-346.

⁴³ Memo, INR, "The Situation in South Vietnam: the Quiet Coup" (27 Jan 1965), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 25, "[Southeast Asia, 1961-1964, Vietnam] General, 1/65-2/65"; Memo, McNaughton, "Observations re South Vietnam after Khanh's 're-coup'" (27 Jan. 1965), LBJL, Warnke Papers, Box 1. Folder 4, #67.

negotiated settlement.”⁴⁴

In late 1964 and early 1965, some U.S. intellectuals also warned against an escalation, even though the majority of the U.S. public and most on Capitol Hill remained either supportive or “not sure” of action against the DRV.⁴⁵ A letter to President Johnson in late 1964 (“We, 5,000 American College and University Educators, Urge a Neutralized Vietnam”), for example, indicated the growing discontent in academia, portending the rise of anti-war activism in universities in mid-1965.⁴⁶ In his reply to William Bundy’s letter in January, Marcus Raskin (Co-Director of the Institute for Policy Studies) also criticised what he saw as Bundy’s “either-or dead or red” view of world politics that “distorts the actual relationships of the various groups in [Southeast Asia].” He added that Bundy’s “apocalyptic view” was a hindrance to sophisticated foreign policy, which required diplomatic skill and prowess, and that his “misguided passion...obscures, rather than illuminates our interest in southeast Asia.”⁴⁷ Arguably the most powerful case against direct intervention around that time was Senator Frank Church’s interview with the leftist magazine *Ramparts* (January–February 1965) published in December, in which he pointed out: “If we move in and take over in an effort to

⁴⁴ Cable, M. Bundy to Taylor, (2 Feb 1965), LBJL, Westmoreland Papers, Box 5, Folder 1, #36.

⁴⁵ As to the attitude of the wider public, surveys reported in the *Washington Post* in 1964 showed that the percentage of people supporting “military pressure against North Viet-Nam” gradually increased from 26% in March and 31% in July to 50% in August (just after the Gulf of Tonkin incident), whereas those opposing that policy declined from 45% in March to 37% in July and 25% in August. At the same time, between a fourth and a third of Americans remained “not sure” (29% in March, 32% in July and 25% in August). In the Capitol, according to Jonathan Moore and Spike White’s informal survey in early 1965, “the great majority of Congressmen are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied; their thoughts are fragmented and they are genuinely perplexed. In this state, they are willing to go along with the people who have the direct responsibility, the experts, in the Executive Branch. Of the remainder, there are substantially more people who are definitely with us...than there are who are definitely against us.” At the same time, they added, the supporters of a diplomatic settlement – including Wayne Morse, Earnest Gruening and the “Church-McGovern-Pell-Gore-Nelson group” in the Senate– were “growing in size and boldness.” Louis Harris, “The Harris Survey: U.S. Handling of Viet-Nam Issue Has Public Confused, Cautions,” the *Washington Post* (30 March 1964); Louis Harris, “The Harris Survey: Americans Are 85 Pct. With Johnson On Ordering Viet-Nam Air Strikes,” the *Washington Post* (10 Aug 1964), both in LBJL, Office Files of the White House Aids, Frederick Panzer, Box 180, “1963-1964, LBJ Job Rating and Vietnam”; Memo, Jonathan Moore to William Bundy, “Congressional Attitudes on SVN” (n.d.), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 25, “Southeast Asia, 1961–1964, Vietnam, General, 1/65–2/65.”

⁴⁶ Letter, to the President, “We, 5,000 American College and University Educators, Urge A Neutralized Vietnam” (n.d.), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 24, “Southeast Asia, 1961–1964, Vietnam, General, 9/64–12/64.”

⁴⁷ Letter, Raskin to W Bundy (25 Jan 1965), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 25, “Southeast Asia, 1961–1964, Vietnam, General, 1/65–2/65.” This comment was made in response to Bundy’s argument that “I can see little hope that they [diplomatic negotiations] would lead to any result other than a Communist Viet-Nam and a greatly increased threat of Communist domination to the whole area. I would be interested in your analysis on just how this accords with our national interest.” Letter, W Bundy to Raskin (11 Jan 1965) in the same folder.

thwart the impending success of a Communist insurrection, the Asian peoples...will come at once to regard the war as one between a white western force on the one hand, and indigenous Asian forces on the other. And there is no way for us to win such a war on the Asian continent.”⁴⁸

By January, however, the main focus of the Vietnam policy community had shifted toward a final preparation for military campaign. The State Department, with the CIA’s help, produced a White Paper on North Vietnam’s support for southern insurgents (“Aggression from the North”),⁴⁹ while the Pentagon was making final adjustments to its operational plan. A “harassed and harried” meeting of senior policymakers on 21 January, according to Chester Cooper, focused entirely on practical details (such as evacuation of the Americans, release of data about infiltration and press guidance), and ended in just about 11 minutes “without time for thoughtful discussion.”⁵⁰

It was in this atmosphere of uncertainty and lack of serious policy debate in Washington that McGeorge Bundy visited South Vietnam in early February 1964. His meeting with the U.S. mission on 5 February led to a conclusion in favour of sustained aerial campaigns against the DRV. The next day (6 February), insurgents attacked the U.S. base at Pleiku killing eight and wounding more than a hundred U.S. servicemen. Bundy saw this incident as a valid justification to start a “sustained reprisal” against North Vietnam and recommended that policy to the President in his cable of 6 February. He argued that while the long-term purpose of air strikes was to reduce Hanoi’s will to support insurgents in the RVN, its immediate and main objectives were to boost the morale of the GVN and to damage that of the enemy forces. He stressed the possibility of a “sharp immediate increase in optimism in the South, among nearly all articulate groups” and “a substantial depressing effect upon the morale of Viet Cong cadres.” (The latter prediction was based on “the strong opinion of CIA Saigon.”) At the same time, though, Bundy also warned the President that “We cannot assert that a policy of

⁴⁸ “Vietnam: Interview with Senator Frank Church” *Ramparts* (Jan–Feb 1965), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 25, “Southeast Asia, 1961–1964, Vietnam, General, 1/65–2/65.” For the media’s reaction, see: Congressional record (12 Jan 1965), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 25, “Southeast Asia, 1961–1964, Vietnam General, 1/65–2/65.”

⁴⁹ Memo, CIA, “Summary Statement on Infiltration of Military and Technical Personnel from North to South Vietnam” (3 Dec 1964); Memo, CIA, “Infiltration of Military and Technical Personnel from North to South Vietnam” (3 Dec 1964); Memo, CIA, “Annex A”; Memo, CIA, “Annex B”; Memo, CIA, “Possible Questions and Suggested Answers Relating to a Public Statement on Infiltration” (3 Dec 1964); Memo, CIA, “Reconciliation of Present and Past Estimates of VC Infiltration” (3 Dec 1964), all documents in LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 11, Folder 1, #114, #116, #118, #120, #122, and #124. See also: State Department, White Paper, “Aggression from the North: The Record of North Viet-Nam’s Campaign to Conquer South Viet-Nam” (Feb 1965).

⁵⁰ Memo, Cooper to M Bundy, “Recapitulation of Principals Meeting, Jan 21, 1965” (22 Jan 1965), LBJL, NSF, CFV, Box 12 [2 of 2], Folder 4, #159.

sustained reprisal will succeed in changing the course of the contest in Vietnam. It may fail, and we cannot estimate the odds of success with any accuracy – they may be somewhere between 25% and 75%.”⁵¹ The President accepted the proposal, and operations against the DRV started on 7 February, marking the beginning of direct U.S. involvement in the Vietnam conflict (“America’s war”), which was to last until 1972.

⁵¹ Memo, M Bundy to the President (7 Feb 1964), LBJL, NSF, International Meetings and Travel File, Box 28, Folder 2, #2.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

The cost of direct military intervention turned out to be far greater than most senior policymakers could possibly imagine in 1965. It has been estimated that by the end of the war in 1975 millions of Vietnamese and more than 57,000 U.S. service personnel had lost their lives. Several times more were wounded, and around a fourth of those served in Vietnam (500,000 to 700,000 Vietnam veterans) suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder.¹

These legacies cast a long shadow over the historical debates on the Vietnam War. Although many historians have examined certain aspects of the conflict without making a general judgement on the war itself, the historiography of the Vietnam War has been dominated by the disagreement between those who regard the war as a mistake and those who depict the same event as an “honourable war” fought for a “noble cause.” The historical accounts of Vietnam intelligence show a similar tendency of dichotomy. For decades, the “sound but ignored” defence of former CIA officers has coexisted with the “not only wrong but also influential” line of stricture implied by former senior policymakers.

This study suggests that each of these interpretations is a valid – if partial – description of Vietnam intelligence in the first half of the 1960s. On the one hand, there are some subjects on which the intelligence community provided relatively clear and sound assessment. The MACV, for example, kept a detailed record of the number and form of enemy attacks across the RVN. This allowed the U.S. and the GVN to follow the changing pattern of enemy activities on the military front, if not the political one. The CIA’s assessments of political manoeuvre and coup plots within the South Vietnamese government during the political crises in 1963 and 1964 (though not the parallel developments in public demonstrations) appear to be well informed and analytically astute. The intelligence community also skilfully exploited limited information to extrapolate many of the key trends in North Vietnam (in terms of its economy, internal security, military capability and domestic politics), even though the analysis of Hanoi’s intentions remained highly speculative. In general, intelligence tended to be strong on subjects on which information was extensively available (notably the politics within the GVN, with which the U.S. mission had numerous contact points) and/or with which the U.S. intelligence community had already developed expertise elsewhere (conventional

¹ Stanley Kutler ed., *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1996), pp. 103-105, 442.

military statistics that were used during the Second World War and the Korean War, and the analysis of North Vietnamese capabilities that had similarities with the Soviet estimates).

In addition, there were four occasions between December 1961 and February 1965 when intelligence highlighted, if not rigorously analysed, some of the key weaknesses of the GVN/U.S. policy, suggesting that the insurgency was far more difficult to contain than had been widely assumed. The first such occasion was in early summer 1962 when almost all major channels reported basic problems in the GVN/U.S. war efforts. The second occasion arose in early 1963, when the CIA's Office of National Estimates and the INR tried to convince policymakers that the counterinsurgency was not going well especially on the socio-political front. The third wave of critical assessments appeared in December 1963 to February 1964 when, after the overthrow of the Diem regime, Washington accepted the negative trend and many problems were once again made clear to policymakers. In November 1964, finally, the intelligence panel of the NSC Working Group stressed that "Even under the best of circumstances...reversal of present military trends will be extremely difficult" and that "The basic elements of Communist strength in South Vietnam remain indigenous."

On the other hand, however, intelligence assessments remained relatively weak in at least three important respects. First, there were many analytical gaps and flaws across diverse subjects, especially on human-related aspects of the counterinsurgency. As to the strengths and weaknesses of the GVN, there appears to have been no robust reporting/analytical system on administrative problems, the competence and morale of soldiers, or the enemy penetration of the ARVN, even though some of those problems were mentioned in various documents. Most aspects of the NLF (including its organisational structure, political operations and logistic activities) also remained a major gap in analysis. So did the reason why a large number of South Vietnamese had joined the NLF and why the Front could maintain high morale among its members. This also points to the general absence of studies on the attitudes of the rural population (except for a few reports in mid-1962 that shed some light on socio-cultural sources of their apathy toward the government). Those weaknesses indicate that, while the Pentagon's Order of Battle statistics have been the main target of criticism (especially by former CIA analysts²), more significant weaknesses lie in the non-military side of intelligence assessments, for which the civilian intelligence agencies were also responsible.

The second major weakness lay in National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) in

² Adams, *War of Numbers*; Allen, *None So Blind*.

general, which was expected to provide the intelligence-community-wide analysis of the broad picture of the conflict and possible policy outcomes. With the exception of those on North Vietnamese capabilities, the estimative products were not available when they were most needed or fell short of providing a thorough and sound assessment. On the counterinsurgency in South Vietnam, the intelligence community published no NIE in 1962, and two (S)NIEs on that subject that came out in 1963 and 1964 had certain flaws and limitations: NIE 53-63 (April 1963) accepted the optimistic view of the Pentagon rather than the critical judgement of the CIA/ONE expressed in the original drafts; and SNIE 53-2-64 (October 1964) was limited in scope, focusing largely on the short-term prospects of the GVN. As to the probable consequences of a military coup in 1963, SNIE 53-3-63 (June 1963) confirmed the State Department's argument for a regime change and failed to fully recognize the risk of removing the Ngo family in the middle of the fight against the insurgency. Two SNIEs on the likely results of air strikes published in 1964 (SNIE 50-2-64 in May and SNIE 10-3-64 in October) also contained a certain amount of wishful thinking with regard to North Vietnamese intentions and probable response.

The third, and arguably the most significant, problem with Vietnam intelligence was the overall analytical biases in favour of Washington's justification for its Vietnam policy (that is, the arguments that the United States was defending the freedom of the South Vietnamese people against "aggression from the North,"³ and that the defence of the GVN was necessary for the United States' own national security). In tune with those claims, analysts failed to emphasise the fact that the NLF was gaining strength from South Vietnamese nationalist sentiment as well as from the people's anger at what they saw as the GVN's mistreatment of its people. Furthermore, CIA documents in 1964 reinforced, rather than questioned, the domino theory by focusing upon threats in Southeast Asia and the possible negative consequences of losing the GVN rather than uncertainty and factors favourable to the United States.

Those weaknesses played an important role in the failure to contain the insurgency during the first half of the 1960s and the decision for direct military intervention in 1965. The lack of thorough and robust analysis of the conflict in South Vietnam (especially its qualitative, politico-psychological dimension) made it difficult for Washington to develop the carefully coordinated socio-political projects necessary to win the hearts and minds of the rural community. The same deficiencies lay behind the repeated attempts to reverse the tide of the conflict

³ State Department, White Paper, "Aggression from the North: The Record of North Viet-Nam's Campaign to Conquer South Viet-Nam" (Feb 1965).

through simple policy initiatives (notably the rapid expansion of Strategic Hamlets and the aggressive use of air strikes in 1962, the overthrow of the Diem regime in 1963, and the military action against North Vietnam in 1965) without taking seriously their limitations and negative consequences. The general biases in intelligence products also reinforced policymakers' beliefs that the United States could and should win the conflict, keeping Washington on the course of escalation.

Causes of failure

The problems outlined above can partly be explained by methodological challenges of intelligence analysis. They include what specialists call "tradeecraft" issues, such as the problem of definition ("insurgent" and "completed Strategic Hamlet" for example); the limit of objectively analysing intangible factors (such as the competence of South Vietnamese leaders); the analysis of mixed trends and complex causal mechanisms (the causes of failing war efforts in particular); and the analysis and communication of probabilities and uncertainties in national estimates (especially with regard to the probable consequences of a regime change and air strikes). The lack of information and knowledge, especially on non-military aspects of the counterinsurgency, intensified those basic technical problems of intelligence analysis. On top of these, the absence of a clear strategic framework made it difficult to discuss the significance of each factor in the conflict and to produce a robust intelligence estimate acceptable to the diverse organizations involved in Vietnam policy.

Organisational aspects – with regards to management, structure, and procedure – also affected the quality of intelligence and intelligence-policy relations. In this respect, the lack of resources especially on the civilian side of the intelligence community remained one of the most basic problems throughout the first half of the 1960s. From the start, too, the whole process of intelligence production was highly fragmented, another problem that helps explain a shortage of intelligence estimates. On top of this, the intelligence-policy relation suffered from two contrasting problems. In the process of intelligence production, on the one hand, the two spheres lacked a degree of separation necessary for reducing the risk of intelligence being politicized. In the use of intelligence, on the other hand, the coordination mechanism between the two sides remained ineffective, making it hard for analysts to make their products relevant to Vietnam policy, and for policymakers to incorporate intelligence into their decision-making. The State Department's contingency planning for a regime change in June 1963 and the early part of the policy inquiry in 1964 into the possibility of escalation in particular took

place without extensive support from the intelligence community.

The distorting effects of personal and political interests (“politicization”) operated at various levels. Low-ranking officers, for example, were reluctant to challenge the view of their government “for career purposes.” Bureaucratic politics also had negative effects upon intelligence and intelligence-policy relations, particularly in 1963 when a growing tension between the State Department and the JCS resulted in one-sided assessments from both parties, epitomised by Krulak and Mendenhall’s reports to the NSC in September 1963. Less parochial but equally detrimental was the political need of the administration to sustain the morale of the friendly forces and to justify the U.S. involvement in the Vietnamese conflict. Those pressures were particularly strong in August 1962, when Nolting advised the GVN to “inject a note of hope” to mitigate the war-weariness among the friendly forces and to counter the call for a neutralist solution; in September 1963, when Kennedy sent McNamara and Taylor to the RVN to “assure Congress that the war can be won in a finite period”⁴; and in March 1964, when Washington was once again aware of the growing pressure to consider a diplomatic solution.

Those political pressures also point to wider contexts of the U.S. foreign policy – or “national security culture” – of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. The apocalyptic “either-or dead or red view of world politics”⁵ in the middle of the Cold War and the domino theory, both of which Kennedy inherited from his predecessor, proved to be a hindrance to a sound analysis of the conflict and the geopolitics of Southeast Asia. So too was the country’s general lack of experience in counterinsurgency. Relatively limited resources and attention dedicated to intelligence, together with the administrations’ tendency to dispatch a fact-finding mission to Saigon chaired by policymakers rather than to ask for objective intelligence support from analysts, might well confirm the suggestion that Kennedy and Johnson had relatively little interest and confidence in intelligence in general.

Apart from the Presidents, the competence, character and personal background of senior officers also affected the quality and role of intelligence materials. This includes Gen. Harkins’ and Ambassador Nolting’s tendency to exaggerate positive developments in their reports to Washington, John McCone’s penchant for relying on his own instincts and to agree with the JCS (due possibly to his close contact with Gen. Krulak) and McNamara’s faith in statistics (which he had developed throughout his career).

⁴ Cable, Taylor to Harkins (21 Sept 1963), NA, RG 218, Records of Gen. Maxwell Taylor, Box 12, “091 Vietnam (Aug 63–Oct 63).”

⁵ Letter, Raskin to W. Bundy (25 Jan 1965), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 25, “Southeast Asia, 1961–1964, Vietnam, General, 1/65–2/65.”

All this suggests that problems in Vietnam intelligence – which originated both in the realm of intelligence itself and in the wider policy context – were very much structural. Many of the key problems, including organisational flaws, political constraints and ideological biases, were quite difficult for analysts and policymakers to rectify. Improvement in some areas was possible, but did not necessarily change the overall quality of intelligence and intelligence-policy relations, as the reform attempts in early 1964 demonstrated.

Intelligence and the historiography of the Vietnam War

The above findings largely support the orthodox interpretation of the origins of the Vietnam War that misperceptions and miscalculations were central to the decision to escalate U.S. involvement in 1965. Certainly, it is misleading to say that the U.S. government “did not know” the conflict, its allies and its enemies as Gen. Taylor claimed: some of the key factors, such as the generally unfavourable trend in South Vietnam, and some of the key trends in North Vietnam, had become reasonably clear to policymakers by early 1965. However, it is also an exaggeration to argue that policymakers in the U.S. government “generally had a sound grasp of the situation on the ground in South Vietnam, and the thinking in Hanoi” as Logevall suggests.⁶ Washington’s understanding of the conflict in the South was full of gaps and distortions, and to significant extent the intentions of Hanoi, Beijing and Moscow remained a matter of speculation.

A less decisive answer can be given to the broader question about the rights and wrongs of the Vietnam War. The fact that the 1965 decision was based on misperceptions and miscalculations does not necessarily mean that the decision itself was a mistake. Uncertainty also arises from the “what if” questions concerning the possible consequences of other options Washington rejected (such as withdrawal, diplomatic initiatives in Southeast Asia and the concentration on counterinsurgency within South Vietnam), which cannot be answered conclusively.

What this study can highlight, nonetheless, is the arguments used by the White House to justify its decision for direct military intervention in 1965 did not fully acknowledge the complexity of the conflict and its international environments. First of all, the basic normative claim that Washington was supporting the GVN to defend the South Vietnamese people from an “aggression from the North” obscured the fact that most of the NLF members and supporters were South Vietnamese fighting for their own conception of justice (including national self-determination and a proper treatment of the people by their own government).

⁶ Fredrik Logevall, “Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 34 (2004), pp. 105-106.

Secondly, as to the question of whether the war was winnable, policymakers kept overestimating the prospects for victory due partly to their relatively limited understanding of the diversity and depth of the problems facing the GVN. They were not fully informed of the historically rooted apathy of peasants toward the central government, the skill and determination of the NLF, the administrative and political problems of the GVN, and the structural weaknesses of the U.S. government itself (which includes the intelligence-related problems discussed earlier).

Thirdly, analytical biases and logical leaps also featured prominently in the argument that a war was necessary. The claim about the need to “pay any price and bear any burden” to defend the GVN was based on an almost exclusive focus on geopolitical threats and the metaphor of the domino, as opposed to the opportunity for the Western block and the limits of Communist influence in Southeast Asia. The U.S. government, moreover, failed to recognise that, even accepting the need to defend the GVN, a massive military intervention was not necessarily the best option to achieve that objective. As supporters of Option A tried to clarify in November 1964, there were advantages to concentrating on the counterinsurgency within South Vietnam with a primary emphasis on socio-political dimensions, rather than expanding the scope of military operations into North Vietnam using the U.S. forces (which could divert the attention from the non-military projects in the RVN and make the U.S. actions look more like those of France during the First Indochina War).

Those counterpoints indicate that the case for the war – in terms of its moral cause, prospects and necessity – was much weaker than most senior policymakers apparently believed. This gap between the complex and ambiguous reality of the Vietnam conflict and the relatively simple and one-sided view of Washington at least helps explain why during the second half of the 1960s, when the gap became more obvious, it was increasingly difficult for the U.S. government to maintain public support for its massive military operations in Vietnam and why in early 1965 policymakers could not predict this political outcome.

Intelligence, realism and international security

Vietnam intelligence in the first half of the 1960s points to the basic limits of a shrewd, reality-based foreign policy advocated by Classical Realists during the 1950s. It underlines various hurdles against some of the key realist prescriptions, such as sound and objective analysis, the art of the possible, the political prudence to bring non-factual elements in proper relation with the reality, and the

anti-totalitarian principle of not claiming the “monopolistic possession of the truth about men and society.”⁷

Vietnam shows that objective analysis itself had its limits in the face of a dynamic, unpredictable security problem. It also suggests that, in the gap of solid analysis of facts and probabilities, non-factual elements in decision-making (such as the political need to believe in victory, the distorted image of the enemy, and the domino metaphor) could played a dominant role in policymaking, further undermining policymakers’ grip of reality. The result of those problems was a mixture of cognitive weaknesses – such as distortion, logical leaps, wishful thinking, and blindness toward vital details and complexity – and a general confusion between reality as it is and a reality one wants or imagines.

Compared to a simple case of inaccuracy or miscalculation, this generic form of cognitive failing proved much harder to refute or rectify by counter-evidence or counter-argument, whether this took the form of warning by intelligence analysts, criticism by journalists, critical advice from Senator Mansfield or dissenting argument by George Ball.

This also helps explain why democratic scrutiny and the Just War paradigm could not prevent the outbreak of the Vietnam War in 1965. Vietnam was a case in which democracy did not work as a bulwark against war, at least not until it was too late. In late 1964 and early 1965 the majority of the U.S. public, as did most of their representatives on Capital Hill, remained either supporting or “not sure” about military action against North Vietnam (see Chapter 8, footnote 46). This result is hardly surprising given that the administration itself was struggling to understand many aspects of the Vietnam conflict, and at a time when the U.S. public had long been exposed to the Cold War rhetoric of its own government. Certainly, some critics (including the “Church-McGovern-Pell-Gore-Nelson group” in the Senate, the *New York Times*, and 5,000 “college and university educators”) did criticise the government’s policy and/or call for a diplomatic settlement.⁸ However, as they remained a minority, the effect of their criticism was largely confined to an increase in pressure on policymakers to intensify their public relations campaigns, rather than to rethink their policy direction. This is, of course, not to deny the possibility that democracy, on balance, has positive effects on international security: it can increase the transparency of its government; and the anti-Vietnam demonstrations

⁷ Morgenthau, *Truth and Power*, p. 356.

⁸ Memo, Jonathan Moore to William Bundy, “Congressional Attitudes on SVN” (n.d.), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 25, “Southeast Asia, 1961–1964, Vietnam, General, 1/65–2/65”; Letter, to the President, “We, 5,000 American College and University Educators, Urge A Neutralized Vietnam” (n.d.), JFKL, Thompson Papers, Box 24, “Southeast Asia, 1961–1964, Vietnam, General, 9/64–12/64.”

in the late 1960s showed that, in certain contexts, democracy can act as a force for peace rather than war.⁹ However, Vietnam also demonstrated that the people do not always have the information and analytical expertise necessary for making critical judgements about external affairs and their country's foreign policy, both of which are rarely simple or transparent. Furthermore, in a democracy under external threats (or what George Kennan called "embattled democracy") the pressure to mobilise and maintain public support through persuasion, rather than coercion, can reduce the level of realism in its foreign policy.¹⁰

Vietnam also draws attention to the possible weaknesses of the Just War theory, which is central to international law on the use of force. As to the "reasonable chance for success," all McGeorge Bundy could say to Lyndon Johnson when he recommended military action against the DRV in early February 1965 was that "the odds of success...may be somewhere between 25% and 75%."¹¹ The "imminence of threat," another criterion for a just war, proved equally elusive when the main threat in question was an unverifiable risk (such as the possibility of a domino-like effect) that was open to wild speculations and could not be disproved by evidence. As Howard Zinn explained in 1967:

[Political scientist Robert] Scalapino puts the burden of proof on the advocates of withdrawal...it is a curious reversal of the rules of evidence in civilian jurisprudence to say that someone under attack must present proof to show why the attacker must stop! Surely, it is the other way around. Not only must the United States prove why it must continue its ferocious assault on Vietnam, but the scale of violence demands that it prove this beyond a reasonable doubt. We demand unanimity among twelve citizens before we will condemn a single person to death, but we will destroy thousands of people on a supposition as fragile as Eisenhower's dominos or Scalapino's checkers. There is a good reason why the "domino theory" is the last line of defense for the Vietnam hawks, and why they put the burden of *disproving* it on their critics...This is because the domino theory rests on suppositions about the future, which are impossible to prove *conclusively* one way or the other...International affairs are complex, and predictions are extremely unreliable.

While this is not to question the benefit of the Just War theory *per se*, the case of Vietnam does underline that it is less likely to function effectively as a means to minimise the use of force when leaders are unable and/or unwilling to make a sound assessment of the complex situation and to resist the temptation to abuse uncertainty.

⁹ For the role of the U.S. media during the war, see: Daniel Hallin, *The Uncensored War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

¹⁰ Kennan as quoted in Zinn, *Vietnam*, p. 84.

¹¹ Memo, M Bundy to the President (7 Feb 1964), LBJL, NSF, International Meetings and Travel File, Box 28, Folder 2, #2.

Intelligence history is a good place to examine some of these problems. In many countries, including the United States, the intelligence community is assigned the role that Morgenthau expected from academia: telling the truth to those in power. The failure-ridden history of this unique institution provides an opportunity to investigate diverse problems associated with the simple principle of seeing the world as it is. Along with other historical cases, including the intelligence failures before the outbreaks of the two world wars, Vietnam serves as a fine showcase of those difficulties. It shows that limitations of realism arose not only from the dynamic, unpredictable security situation in and around the RVN but also from the practically imperfect and politically charged environment of Vietnam policymaking in the U.S. government. The difficult relations between policymakers and intelligence analysts also crystallises the tension between political actions and truth seeking (or what Isaiah Berlin describes as “the dynamism and falsifying influence of passionate, simple, one-sided faith, as against the clear-sighted sense of the complex facts and inevitable weakness in action which flows from enlightened scepticism”).¹² Those problems also draw attention to potential limits of international security, for it counts ultimately upon member states’ – and, increasingly, many non-state actors’ – ability to be “informed and restrained” by sound assessments of the changing reality,¹³ which is seldom simple and predictable.

¹² Isaiah Berlin, “Tolstoy and Enlightenment,” in Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, p. 260.

¹³ The United States, Morgenthau contends, “was founded not upon power blindly and unrestrainedly pursued, but upon power informed and restrained by truth.” Hans Morgenthau, *Truth and Power: Essays of a Decade 1960–70* (London: Paul Mall, 1970), p. 28.

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Declaration: This thesis has been composed by the candidate. The work is her own and it has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.